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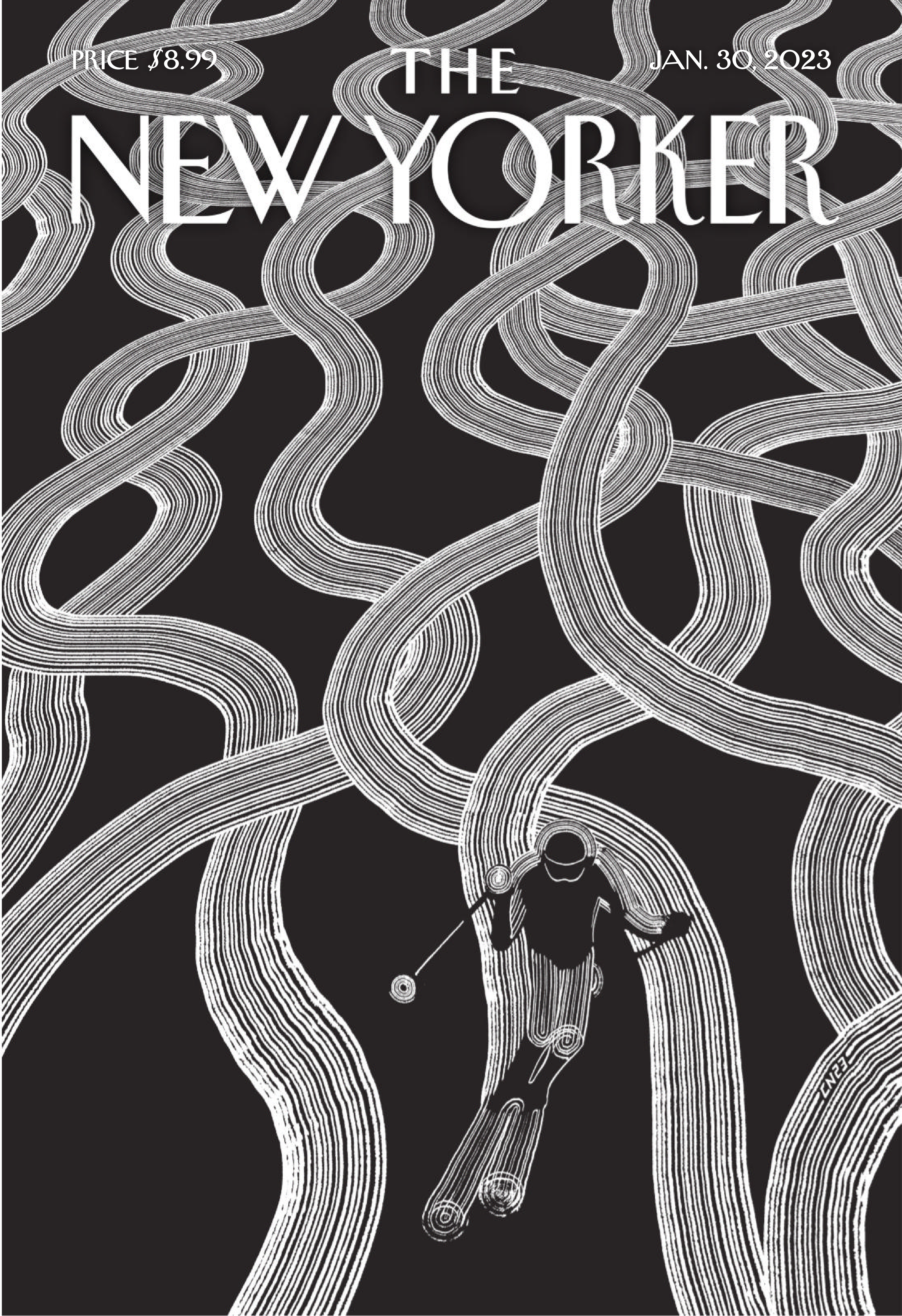
JAN. 30, 2023



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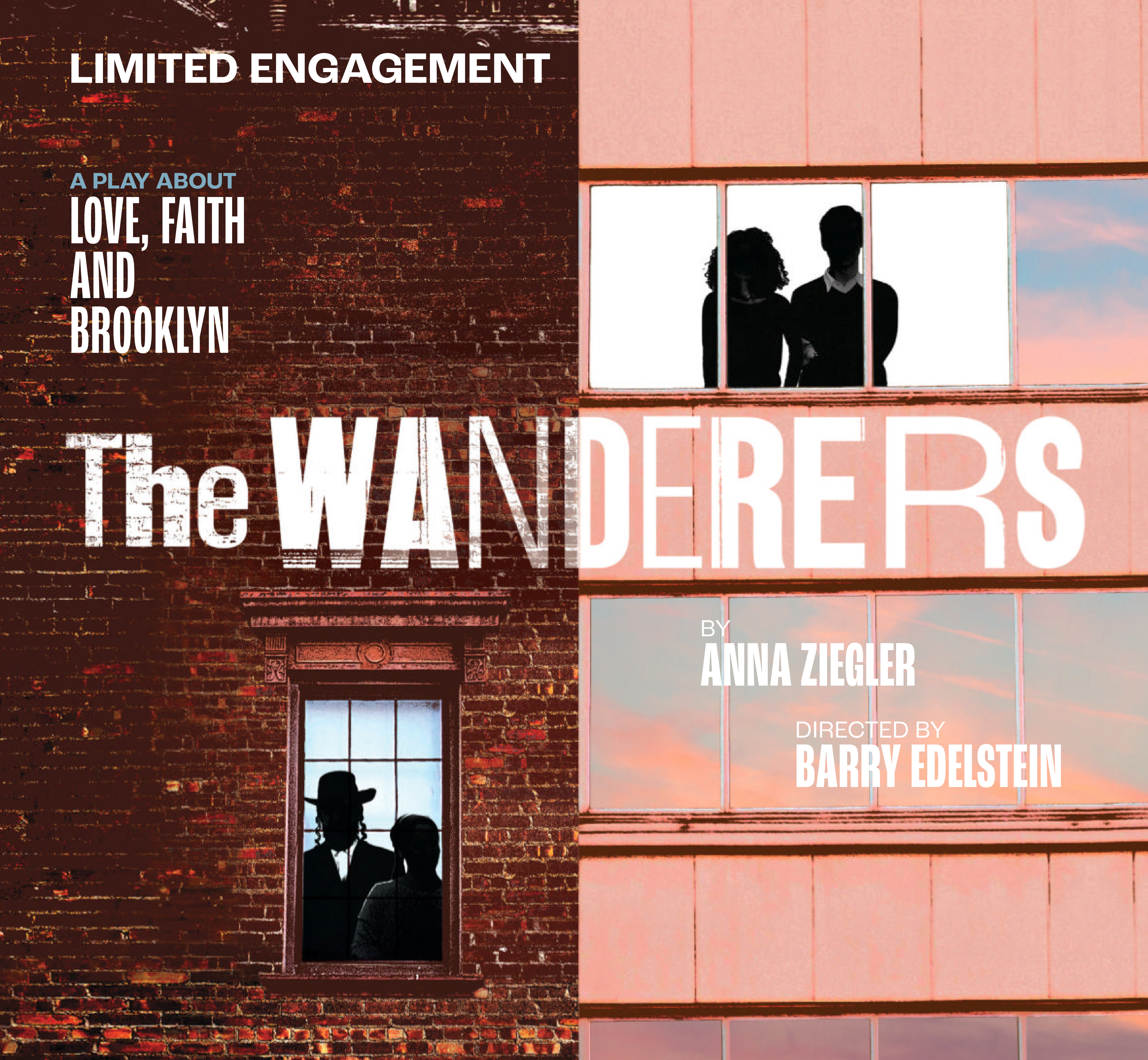

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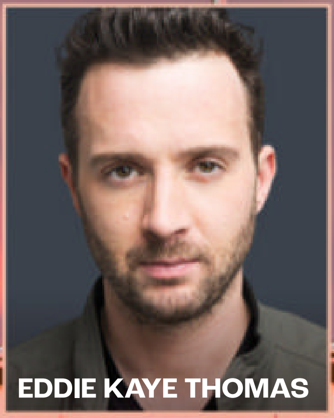
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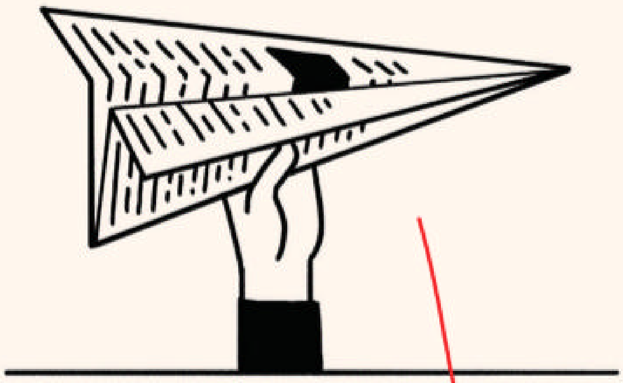

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CONTRIBUTORS

Jon Lee Anderson (*"Lula's Restoration," p. 30*), a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 1998. He is the author of several books, including "Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life."

Beverly Gage (*"One of a Kind," p. 24*), a professor of history at Yale University, published "G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century" last year.

Rosanna Warren (*Poem, p. 36*) published the poetry collection "So Forth" and the biography "Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters" in 2020.

Idrees Kahloon (*Books, p. 63*) is the Washington bureau chief for *The Economist*, where he covers politics and policy.

Clare Sestanovich (*Fiction, p. 52*) is the author of "Objects of Desire." In 2022, she was named a "5 Under 35" honoree by the National Book Foundation.

Vinson Cunningham (*The Theatre, p. 68*), a theatre critic for the magazine, will publish his début novel this year.

Elif Batuman (*"Novels of Empire," p. 42*) is the author of, most recently, the novel "Either/Or." She has been a staff writer since 2010.

Eric Lach (*"Friend of the Mayor," p. 16*) became a staff writer in 2020.

Christoph Niemann (*Cover*) published the artist book "Idea Diary" last year. An exhibition of his work, "Photodrawings," is on display at the Gallery Kicken, in Berlin, through February 16th.

Casey Cep (*Books, p. 58*) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. In 2019, she published "Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee."

Henry Shukman (*Poem, p. 56*) is the author of the memoir "One Blade of Grass: Finding the Old Road of the Heart" and of two poetry collections.

Amy Davidson Sorkin (*Comment, p. 11*), a staff writer, joined the magazine in 1995 and is a regular contributor to Comment. She also writes a column for newyorker.com.

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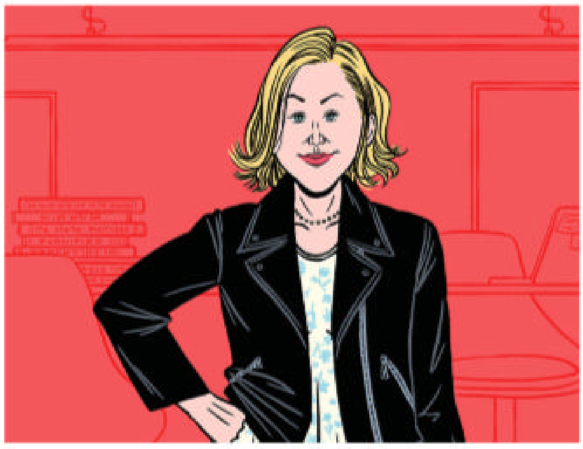
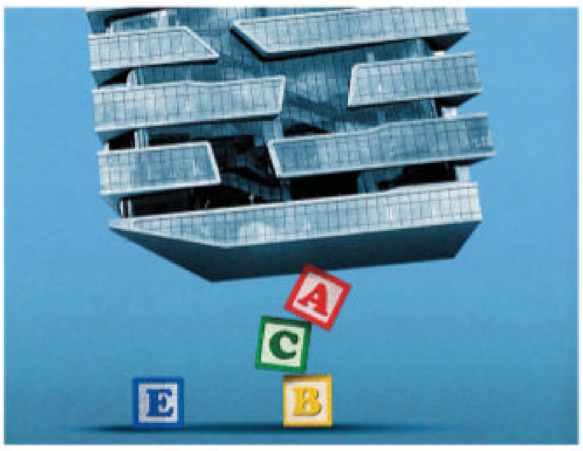


PERSONS OF INTEREST
Molly Fischer writes about Pamela Paul, a contrarian columnist for the Opinion section of the *Times*.



ANNALS OF EDUCATION
Jessica Winter on Columbia's decision to displace a preschool on its campus during a child-care crisis.

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LEFT: NÚRIA JUST; RIGHT: NICK KONRAD; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS: AMIR HAMJA / BLOOMBERG / GETTY; BORTONIA / GETTY

THE MAIL

ON WHEELS

I enjoyed Patricia Marx's marvellous article about electric bicycles, but I wish she had dwelled more on the risks that they present to pedestrians ("Uneasy Rider," January 2nd & 9th). When my wife and I walk around the city, we often come into close proximity with bikes, both electric and traditional, and have had a number of near-collisions with them. It's bad enough when they're riding toward you; it can be terrifying when they swoop from behind.

Coexistence with e-bikes would be simpler if policymakers were more proactive about pedestrian safety. There are many areas where they might start. One is enforcement: both traffic cops and regular police officers have told me that they are not instructed to do anything about biking on the sidewalk. Another is road design: as the lanes on some one-way streets are used for two-way bike traffic, pedestrians must look both ways before crossing the street, even when they have the walk signal in their favor.

Edward Colquhoun
New York City

The popularity of e-bikes has very different implications in rural places than it does in urban areas. On many of the U.S.'s public lands, e-bikes now encroach on narrow trails previously used only by pedestrians or horses. Land managers are giving in to the e-bike lobby and allowing e-bikes wherever traditional bicycles are permitted. And, because e-bikes are heavier than regular bikes and cover more terrain more quickly, they are a greater disturbance to wild animals and their habitats than hikers or bicyclists. They also, of course, disturb people seeking respite from cities and machines.

Vicky Hoover
San Francisco, Calif.

Marx's use of the phrase "road accident" brought to mind the journalist Jessie Singer's book, from 2022, "There Are No Accidents," which argues that many of the deaths we often label accidental can instead be reframed as events that result directly from policy choices. In the case of traffic deaths, Singer points out that many U.S. roads are designed in a way that encourages unsafe driving. A lot of injurious traffic incidents are therefore not unpredictable "accidents" but rather preventable consequences of human decisions.

Andrew Lokay
Washington, D.C.

MEMORIES OF PARTITION

Parul Sehgal's essay about the literature of Partition brought back memories of the stories I heard as a child (A Critic at Large, January 2nd & 9th). My parents were among the millions who made the harrowing trek across the border from Lahore to Delhi. Before that, they lived for years among Muslim neighbors, who sheltered them from periodic violence. After Partition, these neighbors provided them safe passage out of the area. The story I hold most dear is that of my uncle, who was in his late teens in the wake of Partition. He lived in Jammu, in northern India, close to the border with Pakistan. He was a strong swimmer, and he would swim across the Tawi River, carrying Muslims from the east to the west, and Hindus from the west to the east, bringing them to safety.

When it comes to fiction written about Partition, I worry that some books elide the acts of kindness that occurred alongside atrocities. At Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, gardens and tree-lined avenues memorialize individuals who rescued Jews at great personal risk. Remembering and honoring these stories is integral to achieving reconciliation. To me, my uncle's story endures as a similar reminder to break the cycle of violence.

Ripudaman Malhotra
Lake Oswego, Ore.

•

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Those fretting over the future of indie rock can rest assured that the music has found stylish caretakers in the bandmates of **Horsegirl,** who débuted their trio while still in high school, in Chicago—they're now spending their college years in New York. The group's songs put a fresh spin on the type of lovingly harsh guitar sounds that sparkled in the nineties. On Jan. 28, Horsegirl plays Bowery Ballroom as part of Ground Control Touring's Abortion Funds Benefit Series, a concert that confronts America's growing abortion barricade with a rock-and-roll army.

PHOTOGRAPH BY OK McCAUSLAND

As ever, it’s advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

ART

Glen Baldridge

Using a Candy Crush palette, and an abundance of drips and oscillating lines, this Brooklyn artist continues his two-decade-long exploration of subcultural aesthetics in a suite of eight paintings on paper, completed last year. Hippie and psychedelic styles converge in works that evoke summer-camp forays into crafts (marbleized paper, yarn painting, spin art). But, in Baldridge’s slyly exacting exhibition, the deceptively chaotic qualities of his faux-naïf compositions are balanced by a sophisticated restraint. Two paintings—both titled with the disoriented stoner query “Guys, what?”—depict small groups of startled creatures peering out from the pictures. These absurdly groovy figures are rendered by little more than colorful arches of concentric lines anchored by saltwater-taffy-like eyes, which anthropomorphize forms that would otherwise be categorized as biomorphic abstractions. There’s a comment here, perhaps, about pretensions in art and false distinctions between high and low, but it’s a subtle one relative to the rowdy charm of the show over all.—*Johanna Fateman (Klaus von Nichtssagend; through Feb. 11.)*

“Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered”

In 1942, in a now legendary event that introduced New York to Surrealism, André Breton and Marcel Duchamp installed the startling painting “Girl with Pigeons” in a midtown mansion. The picture, of a supine blonde in a blue dress floating on a red divan, was by a Polish American retiree named Morris Hirshfield, a former tailor and slipper designer who had been painting for only five years—with such success that the first two pieces he ever made hung at MOMA, in 1939, just a few months after they were completed. A headline-making figure in life (as reviled by the press as he was admired by the avant-garde), Hirshfield has languished in art’s lost-and-found since his death, in 1946. This abundant show rescues the master of pictorial patterning from obscurity, as does a definitive new book, a labor of love by the show’s curator, Richard Meyer (with vital research by Susan Davidson). Whether Hirshfield is painting a nude woman, a family of zebras, or a parliamentary building, realism is beside the point. His subjects are ornamental, so highly stylized—static, hypnotic—that paint on canvas performs as beads, trim, and pompoms once did on his patented slippers, a delightful selection of which have been re-created by the artist Liz Blahd for the exhibition.—*Andrea K. Scott (American Folk Art Museum; through Jan. 29.)*

Marlon Mullen

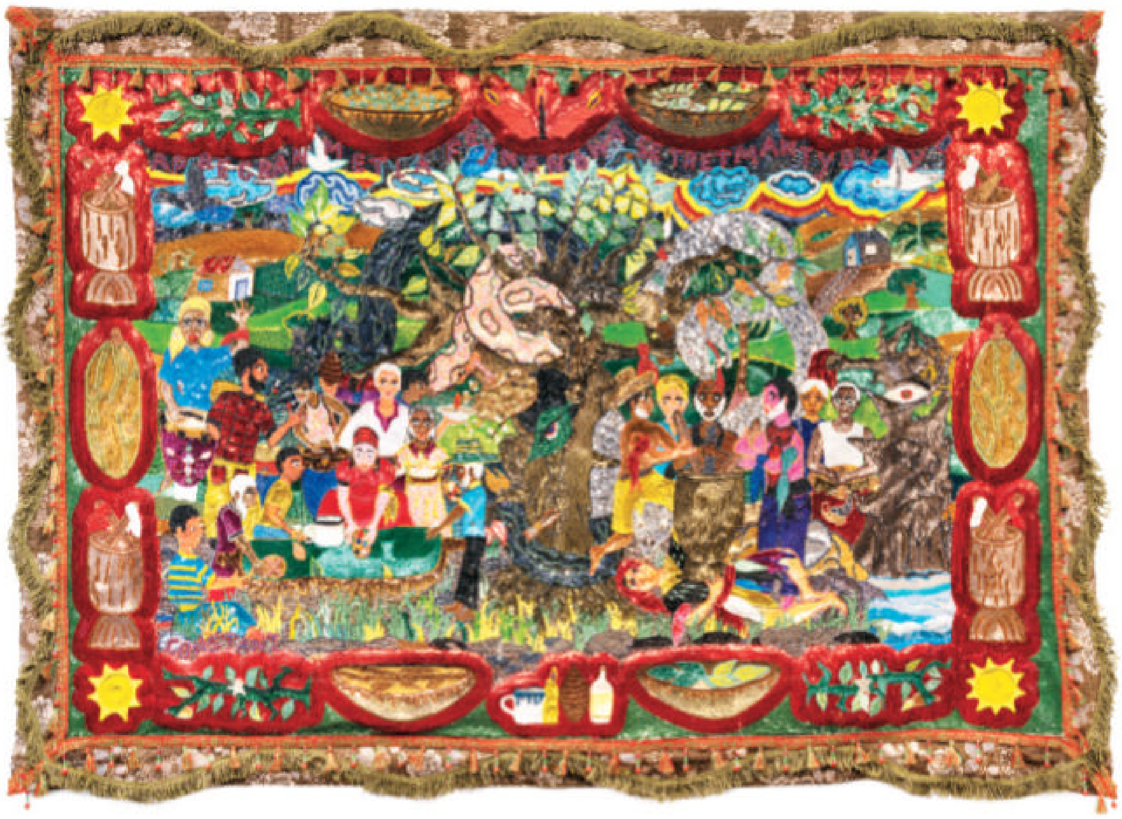
This American painter’s subject matter—the covers, and sometimes the contents, of contemporary-art magazines—might strike some as an insider move, spoofing the art world’s self-referentiality, even daring his targeted periodicals to bring the gesture full circle by reproducing them. But Mullen, who has autism and is mostly nonverbal (he paints at NIAD, an art studio in Richmond, California, for adults with developmental disabilities), has a singular relationship to his source material, which he reproduces with visually commanding spatial distortions and expressive interpretations of graphics. The works on view here span more than twenty-five years; the earliest, from 1996, are the least complex, but they reveal a nascent abstract sensibility. Using thick acrylic pigment, Mullen achieves impasto surfaces and appealingly collagelike effects. His subsequent, magazine-inspired pieces have a jigsaw-puzzle quality; one painting, from 2022, is based on an *Artforum* cover featuring a 1973 photograph by Nan Goldin, of picnicking friends. Mullen’s wonderfully refracted rendition retains something of the original image, including its nod to Manet’s famous canvas “Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe”—a poetically recursive moment.—*J.F. (JTT; through Feb. 11.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

Justin Peck, the company’s resident choreographer since 2014, has had a busy decade and a half. Not only has he made more than forty ballets but he choreographed the dances in Steven Spielberg’s remake of “West Side Story” and, before that, the Broadway revival of “Carousel.” Now his home company has given him the biggest possible canvas to work with: a full evening. He fills it with his newest work, “Copland Dance Episodes,” a non-narrative suite set to music by Aaron Copland, much of it originally composed for dance, including “Appalachian Spring,” “Billy the Kid,” and “Fanfare for the Common Man.” The ballet, which deploys thirty dancers,

AT THE GALLERIES



© MYRLANDE CONSTANT / COURTESY THE ARTIST / FORT GANSEVOORT

Historically, the Haitian art of sewing *drapos,* or vodou flags, was dominated by men. Enter **Myrlande Constant,** whose astonishing textiles are on view at Fort Gansevoort through March 11. In the early nineteen-nineties, the artist left her job at a wedding-dress factory in Port-au-Prince and took up the form—revolutionizing it in the process. Constant adds beads to her compositions, alongside the traditional sequins, using a tambour embroidery stitch that yields both unprecedented intricacy and pictorial depth. You could say that Constant was born to the practice she calls “painting with beads”: her mother was a seamstress and her father was a vodou priest. Now her children assist in the production of her epic pieces, which can take up to six months to complete. (The nine-foot-wide “Apres Gran Met La Fey Nan Bwa Se Tretmant Yo Viy,” pictured above, from 2022, pays homage to both the ceremonial and the secular sides of plant medicine.) With distinctions between so-called outsiders and M.F.A.-minted insiders becoming increasingly moot, Constant’s moment has arrived. Last year, she was in the Venice Biennale’s acclaimed exhibition “The Milk of Dreams,” and in March she’ll be the first Haitian woman to have a solo museum show in the U.S., at U.C.L.A.—*Andrea K. Scott*

THEATRE FESTIVAL

Richard Maxwell's decades of work in the theatre—his New York City Players had their first performance here in 1999—has been an ongoing experiment in aesthetic dehydration. Some call his dilatory work "deadpan," for his refusal to ask his actors to pretend to have emotions, though he's no minimalist. By draining away pretense, he opens up a space to delve into melodrama, violence, allegory, and spectacle onstage. (A recent show included a robot performer, and even that was a heartbreaker.) **"Field of Mars,"** his new commission for N.Y.U. Skirball, in the Under the Radar Festival, through Jan. 29, stars several of the downtown treasures he's worked with before—such as the great Tory Vazquez, Jim Fletcher, and Brian Mendes—along with the electric guitarist James Moore. The plot description says that it takes place in a North Carolina chain restaurant, but clearly Maxwell is continuing his investigation into religious cosmology—Adam and Eve and Satan all turn up, and the second act wanders, as all mystics do, into the desert.—*Helen Shaw*

is performed, without intermission, several times between Jan. 26 and Feb. 7.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; through Feb. 26.)*

Tanzmainz

This German ensemble, from the Staatstheater Mainz, is making its Joyce début, but the work it is bringing looks all too familiar. Sharon Eyal's "Soul Chain" closely resembles the repertory of her own company, L-E-V. To an electronic score by Ori Lichtik, a large ensemble in flesh-colored leotards parades on tiptoe, their hands on their abdomens. Swivels suggest a fashion catwalk; convulsions evoke cold sex. In its overwrought monotony, the style seems to parody itself, humorlessly.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 24-28.)*

THE THEATRE

Between Riverside and Crazy

Walter Washington (Stephen McKinley Henderson, characteristically great), the operatically flawed hero of Stephen Adly Guirgis's play from 2014 (now in its Broadway début), is a through-and-through drunk. He lives in an old, formerly grand apartment on Riverside Drive with his son, Junior (Common), Junior's friend Oswaldo (Victor Almanzar), and Junior's skimpily dressed girlfriend, Lulu (the fantastic Rosal Colón). Walter's in the middle of a long-running feud with the N.Y.P.D., where he used to work as a cop, until he was shot by a white officer. As the force—in the person of his former partner, Detective Audrey O'Connor (Elizabeth Canavan), and her fiancé, Lieutenant Dave Caro (Michael Rispoli)—doubles down on its effort to get him to settle his lawsuit against the city, Walter, in a sequence of tough conversations, paints a portrait of himself as a hard, stubborn, all but unmovable motherfucker. Guirgis's writing and pacing are, as ever, hilariously quick and spot-on. Austin Pendleton directs the actors with the accuracy of a hectic but precise dance. The most heartening thing about this whirlingly accomplished character study is the self-knowledge of its main character. "Do I like myself? Hell no!" Walter says at the outset of one of his tirades. "Do I drink? Hell yes!"—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 1/2 & 9/23.) (Hayes Theatre; through Feb. 12.)*

Frankenstein's Monster Is Drunk and the Sheep Have All Jumped the Fences

This play, written and directed by Zoë Seaton (part of Origin's First Irish festival), based on a short story by Owen Booth, is a richly allusive, campily knowing, often quite funny riff on the Frankenstein myth. Here, Mary Shelley's creation, called the Monster (Rhodri Lewis), has been excavated from a glacier by a tall, strong woman (Nicky Harley) who happens to be a social outcast. They promptly fall in love and marry; the Monster remembers his old life as a B-movie star. He and his bride struggle to be accepted by their fellow-townspeople, played by Vicky Allen and Chris Robinson, who also take turns narrating the show. As we're led through the stages of the couples' lives together, the antic ensemble members show off their singing and dancing, and find laughs in almost all of Seaton's lines.—*V.C. (59E59; through Jan. 28.)*

Heaven

In this new play by Eugene O'Brien (part of Origin's First Irish festival), under Jim Culleton's direction, a pair of intertwining monologues tell the story of a married couple's turbulent passage through middle age. Mairead (Janet Moran) and Mal (Andrew Bennett) are entering their fifties, and they're both, in their own ways, undergoing a kind of personal apocalypse. The repressed Mal made a bargain with himself before he married Mairead—he'd put an end to his youthful altar-boy fantasies of a sexualized Jesus and settle into an outwardly heterosexual life. Now he's seen a Christlike young man and a crisis ensues. Mairead is a tough, funny, outgoing sort, who married Mal to interrupt her long streak of roguish bad boyfriends. At a bar in town, her past rushes back. Moran and Bennett are both excellent performers—their monologues contain a friendly music. But the play depends on tropes that feel wearingly familiar and make the show's ending pat.—*V.C. (59E59; through Jan. 29.)*

The Immortal Jellyfish Girl

The year is 2555 C.E., and humanity has gone extinct. Two evolutionary offshoots battle for control of a blighted Earth: the technologically advanced *Homo technalis* and the biologically advanced *Homo animalis*. This setup is unusual fodder for a puppet show, but "The Immortal Jellyfish Girl," written and directed by Gwendolyn Warnock and Kirjan Waage, revels in the extraordinary. The titular jellyfish girl, Aurelia, zips around on a fluorescent disk, her tentacle-like hair crackling electrically in spasms of emotion. (The lighting and sound design, too, are technologically advanced.) There's also a fox narrator, a lobster phone, a near-omniscient cyborg villainess, and a permeable fourth wall in this singular vision of a climate-changed, A.I.-controlled planet. The imagined future that it conjures ain't pretty, but the show, presented by Wakka Wakka Productions and Nordland Visual Theatre, is stunning—especially its puppetry, designed by the supremely talented Waage, who also performs.—*Dan Stahl (59E59; through Feb. 12.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY JACKSON GIBBS

MUSIC

A Centennial Tribute to Toots Thielemans

JAZZ Although he admittedly never had much in the way of competition, Toots Thielemans was the greatest harmonica player in jazz history. Also a fine guitarist and perhaps the most accomplished whistler the genre has known, the Belgian-born polymath, who died in 2016, was a ubiquitous presence on soundtracks—the themes from "Midnight Cowboy" and "Sesame Street" owe much of their renown to him. But it's Thielemans's supremely lyrical improvisations, whether embellishing mainstream jazz or Brazilian fantasies, that have secured his unimpeachable position in the pantheon. No one has yet taken his place, but Grégoire Maret, a well-respected Thielemans acolyte, pays appropriate homage to the master alongside the pianist and musical director Kenny Werner, joined by the clarinettist Anat Cohen, the guitarist Chico Pinheiro, the bassist Scott Colley, and the drummer Antonio Sánchez.—*Steve Futterman (Dizzy's Club; Jan. 26-29.)*

Nadah El Shazly

EXPERIMENTAL Since the release of her début album, "Ahwar," in 2017, the composer and vocalist Nadah El Shazly has become a pillar of the Egyptian underground—in 2018, she appeared on a cover of the British experimental-music bible *The Wire,* in an issue announcing "Cairo's New Wave." The musician's eclectic background, encompassing choirs, punk rock, and jazz, prepared her for the electroacoustic reimagining of Arabic classical music that's inherent to "Ahwar." Working with more than twenty collaborators on the album—including the psychedelic trio Dwarfs of East Agouza—El Shazly recorded in both Egypt and Montreal with a slate of vanguard contemporary-classical players and improvisers, incorporating kalimba, tablas, harp, oud, saxophone, riq, divan saz, and trip-hop beats. She has expressed an obsession with Egyptian singers born in the nineteenth century, such as Mounira El Mahdeya and Abdel Latif al-Banna, particularly "the futuristic elements in their music." Her songs, taken for a rare American spin here, vibrate with uncanny harmonic textures and a celestial scope.—*Jenn Pelly (Public Records; Jan. 27.)*

Sunny Jain

EXPERIMENTAL The indefatigable drummer and dhol player Sunny Jain is an unrepentant maximalist—were he a visual artist, one imagines bright-hued paints splattered across his canvas, his floor, and perhaps his ceiling. Think of a genre, and it's probably somewhere in his compositions, yet the musician's hullabaloo stands on considered conceptual ground. His album "Wild Wild East," from 2020, recasts the American cowboy myth as a frenzied immigrant's tale, conjoining Punjabi folk and Bollywood sounds with rock, spaghetti-Western atmospherics, and rapping. Jain returns to the "Wild East" to inaugurate a short residency at this uptown theatre, giving three concerts, each exploring a different theme. "American Lullabies" (Feb. 4) is dedicated to the music of his boyhood, from Jainist devotional songs to prog rock, whereas in "Dholusion" (Feb. 9) he shares the spotlight with the classical Indian dancer Yamini Kalluri and the jazz trumpeter Adam O'Farrill. Need more? Come March, Jain's brass band, Red Baraat, tours with its annual "Festival of Colors."—*Jay Ruttenberg (Symphony Space; Jan. 28, Feb. 4, and Feb. 9.)*

Jessy Lanza and AceMoMa

HOUSE The Canadian electronic-dance producer and vocalist Jessy Lanza has made nearly as strong an impression as a d.j.—her guise here—as she has as a recording artist. Her episode of BBC Radio 1's "Essential Mix," from 2020, and the mix CD "DJ-Kicks" limn her appeal as a spinner; her selections are rhythmically boisterous and sharply detailed. AceMoMA—a duo of the Brooklyn house artists AceMo and MoMA—makes a shrewd co-billing. The pair create work, separately and together, that tends to be both laid-back and biting.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Paragon; Jan. 28.)*

Philadelphia Orchestra

CLASSICAL Yuja Wang, a subtle, technically astounding pianist with a pop star's flair for glamorous getups, performed a Liszt concerto at Alice Tully Hall last season while wearing chunky white sunglasses. (She later explained on Instagram that she had been recovering from eye surgery.) And now for something more audacious: she plays all four of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos, plus his "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," with the Philadelphia Orchestra and its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, in a marathon verging on four hours, with multiple intermissions. Her recordings of the famed middle concertos dazzle with darkly spiralling melodies, athletic precision, and an intuitive sense of rhythm, but she illuminates simple moments, like a legato string of triplets in the third movement of the Second Piano Concerto, with mesmerizing self-possession.—*Oussama Zahr (Carnegie Hall; Jan. 28.)*

MOVIES

Li'l Quinquin

Bruno Dumont's three-hour-plus 2014 film is centered on a taciturn fireplug of a boy in a farm village on the northern coast of France. On the first day of summer vacation, he, his

HIP-HOP

Brooklyn drill, a ballistic rap subgenre that stems directly from the combatively percussive music born in Chicago a decade ago, has continued to evolve since the death of its breakout star Pop Smoke, in 2020, spreading across the city in the process. Two emerging artists, the Brooklynite **Bizzy Banks** and the Queens native **Shawny Binladen,** are among those carrying the torch—their collaboration "Whole Lotta Wickery," which flips the Rosemary Fairweather song "Heavenly" by layering it with references to the shoot-'em-up franchise "John Wick," made them drill innovators. On Jan. 25, they bring their distinctive spin on the subgenre, dubbed sample drill for its use of prominent, unspliced samples, to Gramercy Theatre. Unlike many of their predecessors, these artists don't have big, booming voices. Instead, they navigate 808 bass with quiet resolve.—*Sheldon Pearce*

ILLUSTRATION BY SADDO

girlfriend, Eve, and two other friends witness a helicopter airlifting the corpse of a cow from an abandoned Second World War bunker. This surrealistic vision gives rise to the horrific discovery that the corpse is stuffed with human body parts; the resulting police investigation is a quiet uproar of comic bumbling. Dumont thrusts two rustic Keystone Cops into a quasi-documentary contemplation of the region (his own home turf); he looks longingly and lovingly at the craggy landscape, which the children roam for pleasure and the officers scour for business. His nearly anthropological view of local customs (the Bastille Day festivities are detailed and teeming set pieces) doesn't spare any ugliness, from endemic racism to a heritage of violence. Yet the murder plot is of a piece with the raucous comedy; the action seems to rise organically from the locale, and Dumont's grand yet intimate fiction fuses his personal world with the historical moment.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Kanopy, Apple TV, and other services.)*

The Marriage Circle

For his second American film, from 1924, Ernst Lubitsch turned a drawing-room farce into bittersweet chamber music—which, aptly, plays out in Vienna. This silent comedy begins with Professor Josef Stock (Adolphe Menjou) watching his wife, Mizzi (Marie Prevost), storm out of their elegant apartment; he then hires a detective in the hope of finding grounds for divorce. She takes an interest in Dr. Franz Braun (Monte Blue), the husband of her best friend, Charlotte (Florence Vidor), who is, in turn, pursued by Braun's medical partner (Creighton Hale), a psychiatrist. Lubitsch's pointed visual double-entendres bear the shivery eroticism of Freudian suggestions. His appearance-obsessed characters hide their emotional turmoil behind ingratiating masks, but his greatest visual trope is the evocation—by means of images—of a world of sound. The suggestion of a ringing telephone, a tap on a windowpane, a voice in the dark, and a woman weeping behind closed doors may startle the viewer even as they spur characters to motion or freeze them with apprehension. Only a few notes separate these blithe machinations from film noir.—*R.B. (Playing at MOMA on Jan. 30 and streaming on Paramount+, Prime Video, MUBI, and other services.)*

Wild Girl

This turbulent and tangled Western, directed by Raoul Walsh, depicts a rustic post-Civil War outpost in California in all its sordid, violent, and romantic energy. Salomy Jane (Joan Bennett), a barefoot backwoods maiden, innocently arouses the lust of a local grandee (Morgan Wallace), whose predatory past catches up with him in the person of a Virginia stranger (Charles Farrell), a Confederate veteran who comes to town to avenge his sister. Meanwhile, Salomy is being courted by a smooth-talking saloon gambler (Ralph Bellamy) and a crude rancher (Irving Pichel)—and protected by Yuba Bill (Eugene Pallette), a jolly and fast-witted coachman. But the deck is shuffled anew when she and the stranger cross paths. Walsh's richly textured populist panorama, with its simmering feuds, casual gunplay, and corrupt local politics, along with the shoddy justice of vigilante mobs, blends the comic hyperbole of long-ago tall tales, homespun sentimental charm, and the tense spectacle of life and death in the daily balance. With Minna Gombell, as a sharp-tongued madam; Sarah Padden, as a layabout's long-suffering wife; and Louise Beavers, as Mammy Lou, who doesn't live separately but isn't treated equally. Released in 1932.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

The Wolfpack

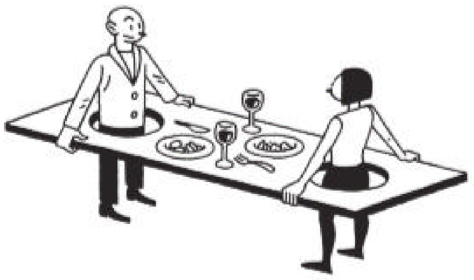
Crystal Moselle directed this documentary, from 2015, about the Angulo clan: two parents, one sister, and—at center stage—six brothers. The boys closely resemble one another, and their lives, in an apartment on the Lower East Side, could not be more tightly interknit. Homeschooling is the least of it. Seldom do the kids leave the place (once, they didn't go out for a year), and their principal conduit to the outside world is through films: watching them; typing out the scripts; learning the lines; fashioning costumes and props, including cardboard guns; and restaging sequences from favorite flicks. "Reservoir Dogs," complete with black suits and ties and white shirts, goes down especially well. If there is a ghost at the feast, it is the father, a Peruvian immigrant who is often glimpsed in old video clips but is seen infrequently in Moselle's own footage, and whose abusive habits and lofty beliefs are mentioned with quiet trepidation. Any shock comes not from the freakiness of the domestic setup but from seeing how thoughtful and decent, by and large, the boys have turned out—far more so than the menacing electronic score would like us to think. Their virtual imprisonment has shaped but not ruined them, and we slowly see them venture into the wilds of regular existence. Should anyone be looking for half a dozen film critics, these guys would fit right in.—*Anthony Lane (Streaming on Tubi, Prime Video, MUBI, and other services.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

SCREENING AND STREAMING

The treasures of Chinese independent filmmaking—a field that has now largely been suppressed by that country's government—include Liu Jiayin's **"Oxhide,"** from 2005, which she made at the age of twenty-three. (It screens at Metrograph on Jan. 28-29 and is streaming on OVID.) The film features a mere twenty-three shots, which are all static, but they teem with action of an unusual sort. The movie is set entirely in Liu's parents' cramped apartment in Beijing, where she, her father (Liu Zaiping), and her mother (Jia Huifen) play themselves, or versions of themselves. The drama is centered on Zaiping's business, making and selling lovingly handcrafted and fancifully styled leather goods; but his sales are scant, the household is drowning in debt, and his staunchly artistic and ethical disdain for the wiles of salesmanship don't help. Doing her own cinematography with a consumer-grade video camera, Liu creates dramatic, cannily framed wide-screen images that emphasize her parents' tense discussions about money and health, acute observations of neighborhood life, and lively reminiscences of happier times. She transforms manual labor, family meals, and even domestic arguments into intimately choreographed spectacles.—*Richard Brody*

ALAMY



TABLES FOR TWO

Eggholic

256-01 Hillside Ave., Queens

In the early nineteen-eighties, in India, an agriculturist named B. V. Rao founded the National Egg Coordination Committee (N.E.C.C.) to protect poultry farmers, not to mention consumers, from traders who bought low, ignoring rising production costs, and sold high. Among the committee's first orders of business was rehabilitating the image of their product, an ingredient largely left out of the average Indian's diet. Rao hired an advertising agency to devise a national campaign to drive interest in the egg. Ads enumerated its nutritional benefits and offered recipes for egg chaats and egg biryanis. A television spot featured the wrestler turned actor Dara Singh delivering a catchy jingle that went "Sunday *ho ya* Monday, *roz khao ande*": "Be it Sunday or Monday, eat an egg."

That the campaign was incredibly successful is borne out by Eggholic, an Indian restaurant that opened in Floral Park, Queens, last year, the latest iteration of a franchise with locations in a seemingly random collection of places united by their growing South Asian populations, including Nashville, Tennessee, and Brampton, Ontario. (A similar franchise, called EggMania, has outposts in Iselin, New Jersey, and Lowell, Massachusetts, among other places.) Eggholic was founded in a suburb of Chicago, in 2018, by Bhagyesh and Lay Patel, cousins who grew up in Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, a majority-Hindu state in western India that's famous for its mostly vegetarian street food. Since the nineteen-eighties, egg dishes have become a major draw at Gujarat's night markets—though not without controversy: some Hindus consider eggs to be meat, and in 2021 Ahmedabad banned the sale of eggs (joining meat and fish) on the street.

Americans, who eat around twice as many eggs as Indians, need no convincing about them; if anything, we take them for granted. But if the threshold for making eggs exciting is higher here, Eggholic pole-vaults over it. Though the setting suggests fast food (the dining room is reminiscent of a bright, clean McDonald's), the staff offers a warm, personalized experience, and the kitchen turns out a dizzying array of casually presented but artfully executed egg dishes.

Start with an "eggetizer" called Green Boiled Fry, featuring two bisected hard-boiled eggs draped in a supple sauce of blitzed green Thai chili and garlic, which pools seductively with oil and almost crackles with salt, a perfect foil to the creamy yolk. A thin "floating" omelette, its surface golden brown and caramelized, is plump with sharp white Cheddar and bathed in a thick tomato purée seasoned with ginger-garlic paste and a proprietary Eggholic medley of spices (cumin and coriander surely among them). For the Masala Half Fry (or Full Fry, if you prefer your yolks less runny), a pair of eggs sunny-side up are blanketed in a dark, intensely concentrated hash of spiced tomato and onion and showered in cilantro.

Some dishes contain more than one iteration of eggs: an omelette called *lapeti* is filled with boiled egg shredded as finely as cheese; for the Lava Pulav, an omelette is left unfolded and topped with a volcano-like mound of turmeric-steamed basmati rice and shredded egg, a ladle of tomato sauce spooned into the middle. Shredded egg thickens the tomato sauce that creates the base of the best-selling Surti Gotalo, which is topped with two fried eggs.

Many dishes, including the Egg Bhurji, scrambled with chopped Thai chili, tomato, onion, ginger, and garlic, are spicy. To offset the heat, there are flaky roti and thick wedges of buttered white toast, plus cold bottles of Indian beer and mango lassis, which become a dessert called Mastani with the addition of vanilla ice cream, nuts, and bright-green, herbal-tasting *khus* syrup, made from vetiver grass. To offset the eggs, there are plenty of dishes that contain none, centering instead on chicken or paneer. But be it Sunday, Monday, or any other day of the week: eat an egg. *(Dishes $1.99-$14.99.)*

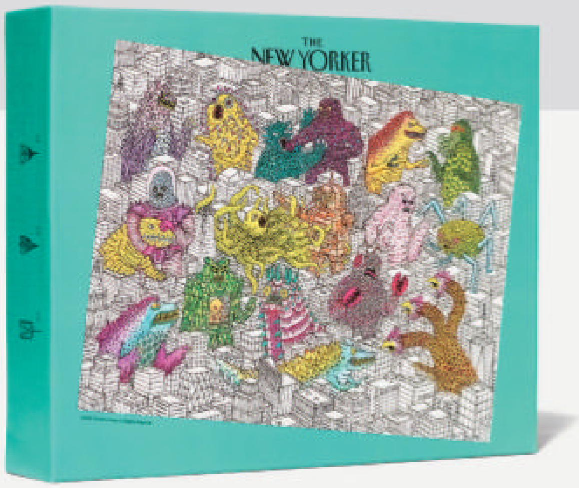
—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY EMMA FISHMAN FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

THE NEW YORKER
STORE

Richard McGuire's Full-Tilt Clock

Edward Steed's
"There Goes the Neighborhood" Puzzle


THE NEW YORKER

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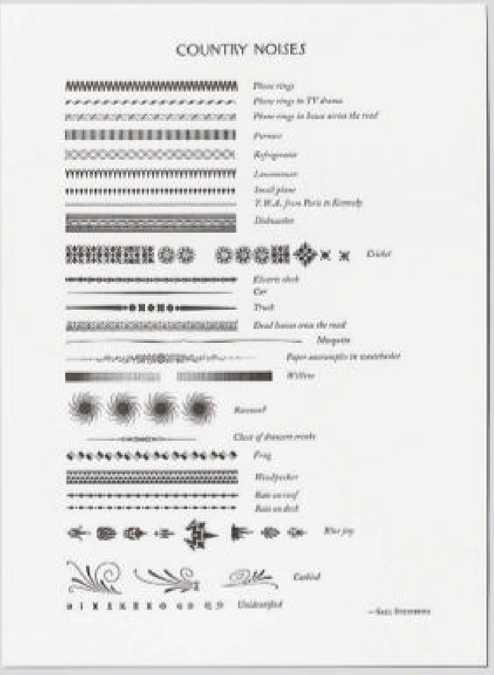
COUNTRY NOISES

Saul Steinberg's "Country Noises" Print

The New Yorker Winter Hat

THE NEW YORKER
STICKER SHEET

The Spot-Art Sticker Sheet

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Rea Irvin's Classic Long-Sleeve T-Shirt

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THE NEW YORKER

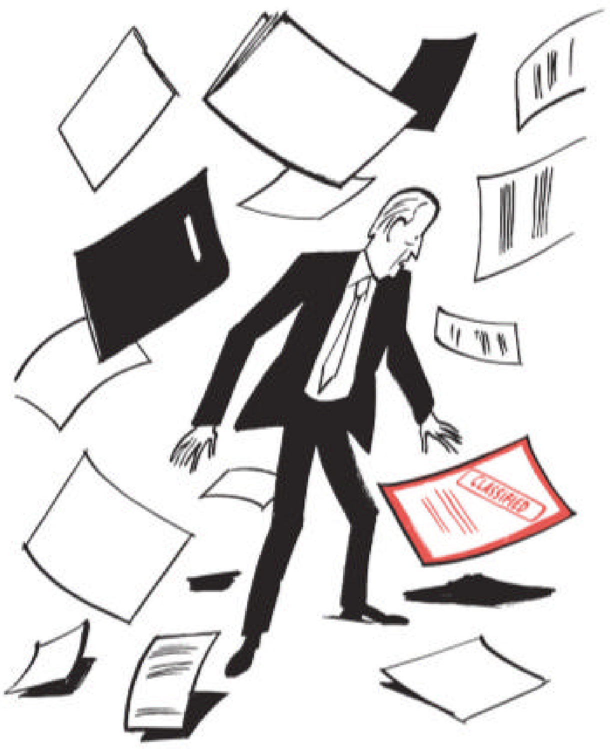
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
A CLASSIFIED MESS

Republicans are, unsurprisingly, in an uproar over the discovery, in three different locations associated with President Joe Biden—his former office at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, a room in his Delaware home, and his garage—of documents marked as classified. But there is some confusion in the G.O.P. ranks about what the focus of their ire should be, and last week it fell to Martha MacCallum, of Fox News, to try to clear things up. She was questioning Representative James Comer, of Kentucky, who had just been speculating about the University of Pennsylvania being in the pocket of Chinese Communists. Comer had suggested, in another interview, that he was concerned not so much about classified documents ending up in a former Vice-President's home as about whether Biden was being treated differently than Donald Trump was when documents marked classified were found at his home, at Mar-a-Lago. "Do you mean that?" MacCallum asked. "Or is it a big deal that he had these documents, and are you concerned about the national-security implications?"

"I'm concerned, because we believe that Hunter Biden, especially, is a national-security risk," Comer said, referring to the President's son. At the same time, "every President has accidentally taken documents that were deemed classified," he continued. "Yet they were never raided. They never were treated with a special counsel, like Donald Trump was. Now we find out that Joe Biden did the exact same thing that *every* President has done."

The complaint from Comer, who is the new chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability, was, to say the least, muddled. Biden has in fact been "treated with" a special counsel: Robert Hur, whom Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed on January 12th. It's not obvious that every President has taken home classified documents, let alone done so with Trump's obstruction, sense of entitlement, and defiance of both the National Archives and the F.B.I. (Biden also didn't try to overturn an election, but that's another story.) Hundreds of documents were found at Mar-a-Lago; so far, Biden's case seems to involve about twenty. One of the many unfortunate aspects of the case, though, is that the count rose as the Biden team let the news come out in dribs and drabs in the course of a week.



The basic time line appears to be this: On November 2nd, a week before the midterm elections, Biden's personal lawyers, who were packing up his office at the Penn Biden Center, found Obama Administration documents, some of them marked as classified. (The Center didn't open until a year after Biden left the Vice-Presidency; it's not clear where the papers were in the meantime.) The lawyers notified the National Archives, which informed the Department of Justice. Both Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who was the Center's managing director, have said they weren't aware that any such records were there. On November 14th, Garland asked a U.S. Attorney to take a look.

More than a month later, on December 20th, Biden's lawyers told the Justice Department that they had found the documents that were in his garage at home. On January 9th, CBS News reported on the papers found at the Biden Center. The Biden team confirmed the report, without, at first, mentioning the garage papers. Two days later, according to the team, the lawyers found another document, in the room in the house. The next day, Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, said in response to a question about the search process, "You should assume that it's been completed." But five more documents were apparently found in the room that evening.

The communications from the White House have been, in short, a mess. When Peter Doocy, of Fox News, asked Biden

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

at a press conference, “Classified material next to your Corvette—what were you thinking?,” the President decided to defend the honor of his car, a 1967 Stingray convertible: “My Corvette’s in a locked garage, O.K.? So it’s not like it’s sitting out in the street.” Cue a New York *Post* headline announcing, “HUNTER BIDEN HAD ACCESS TO DAD’S CORVETTE,” accompanied by a photo of the President’s son seated in the car, which was purportedly found on a laptop belonging to him—the subject of yet another saga.

Comer, who can now wield subpoena power, announced this month that the Oversight Committee will ramp up an investigation into Hunter Biden’s business dealings and those of other family members and associates. And last week, thanks to the promises that Kevin McCarthy appears to have made to secure the Speakership, some of the most Trumpist and conspiracy-minded members of the House G.O.P.—Lauren Boebert, Paul Gosar, Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Scott Perry—got seats on the committee. Greene said that the documents case is an example of a “two-tiered justice system,” that Biden should be impeached, and that the timing of the disclosures was “so much B.S.”

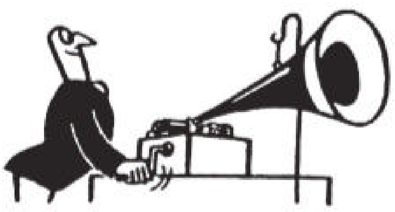
Republican-controlled hearings on the Biden documents will almost certainly be distorted by an imperative to protect Trump. That is a pity, for more than one reason. Comer may have come to the issue in a backward, partisan way, but there are big problems with the government’s classified-documents system. For one thing, there is wide agreement that the United States has an overclassification addiction. As Oona Hathaway, a Yale law professor, told NPR last week, no one even knows exactly how many classified documents there are. It’s estimated that some fifty million new things get classified each year, and the more than two million people with security clearances, military and civilian, can potentially add to the pile, by one route or another. Presidents do not have the power to declassify documents psychically, as Trump has suggested, but their power to do so in other ways is surprisingly broad and ill-defined, governed largely by executive orders and precedent. That reality had complicated the legal case against Trump even before Biden’s lawyers found the first documents.

The President has not yet said for sure if he will run again in 2024. The affair of the documents may prove something of a stress test. Republicans would no doubt like to see all these story lines—the documents, Hunter, the Corvette, Communists—merge into a lurid fog that obscures the real line between Trump’s case and Biden’s. They are not the same, and that is something worth emphasizing. But the fact that these two very different men, for different reasons, both had classified documents in their homes should be cause for reflection about our system of secrecy, too.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

DEPT. OF EARWORMS

LOUDER



Music can be many things, including a weapon. Among the songs that law enforcement and militaries have played, at deafening volume, to break the spirits of adversaries over the years are “Paranoid,” by Black Sabbath (Manuel Noriega, 1989); the “Barney” theme (detainees held at black sites in Iraq, 2003); Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” (cult leader David Koresh, 1993; federal agents also blared recordings of rabbits being slaughtered); and “Oops! . . . I Did It Again,” by Britney Spears (Somali pirates, 2013; a security official said, “I’d imagine using Justin Bieber would be against the Geneva Convention”).

Now the music-as-deterrent technique has been adopted by the Slurpee sector. Franchises of 7-Eleven have been using the tactic to dissuade homeless people from loitering outside. Their music of choice? Opera—Verdi’s “Simon Boccanegra” in Modesto, California; Mozart’s “Don Giovanni” in Salt Lake City, Utah; Bizet’s “Carmen” in San Diego. In New York City, where more than seventy thousand people are unhoused, locals know that the place to get an earful of very loud opera along with your Big Gulp is a 7-Eleven near the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

The other night, a few police officers stood around talking under the store’s glowing sign. “They play it all the time,” one cop said, of the opera music. She wore a bulletproof vest under her coat, and an N.Y.P.D. beanie. Her partner looked as though he had just graduated from high school. “It bothers me,” she said.

A third cop said, “I never once woke up and said, ‘Yeah, I wanna listen to opera music right now!’ ”

The subway rumbled underfoot, sirens blared, and two officers on horseback clopped by. A man named C. J.—who was dressed in several coats and house slippers, and said that he sleeps on the 2 train most nights—gestured at the store. “I like the blueberry muffins in there,” he said. He didn’t like the opera much: “They just play it over and over and over again, all day long. And it’s the same song!”

Why did 7-Eleven choose opera? Jagat Patel, a franchisee in Austin, Texas, who recently installed opera-blaring speakers outside his store, offered his thoughts on local television: “Studies have shown that the classical music is annoying. Opera is annoying.”

A few opera types, ahem, disagreed. “I don’t think there are any studies,” Mary Ann Smart, who is a professor of music at the University of California, Berkeley, said. But she had some theories about why 7-Eleven would choose opera. “It’s not calm,” she said. “It’s fast and loud and active, but it doesn’t have that syncopated aspect that makes people want to dance, or give them the impression that they’re in a club or at a rave.”

The composer Martin Bresnick, who is a professor at the Yale School of Music, hazarded a sociological explanation. “For some people,” he said, “the world of opera is so riddled through with racial and class hierarchies that people feel blocked out of it, or humiliated by it.” A similar point was made by Susan Rogers, a Berklee College of Music professor, who has worked as an audio engineer for Prince and David Byrne. “Familiarity goes a long way toward making us feel welcome,” she said, “and something that’s unfamiliar does the opposite.”

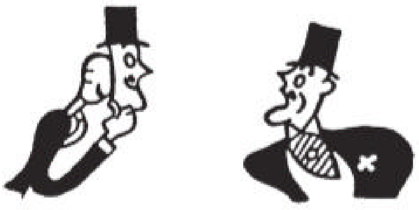
Ellen Reid, who won the Pulitzer Prize for her opera “prism,” in 2019, explained that 7-Eleven had bastardized the form. "Opera is about the storytelling," she said. "It's about the shared experience. Without the context, without the setup, without the agreement of your audience members to be a part of the piece, what is it? Not opera!" She laughed and added, "It's a great premise for an opera: Store owner tries to scare away people!"

It doesn't always work that way. At the 7-Eleven near Union Square, quarter-pound Big Bite hot dogs turned silently on the roller grill, and the beer refrigerators hummed their refrigerator hum. No opera. Outside, a man held a paper 7-Eleven cup, and asked a passerby for some spare change. The passerby wondered how he felt about the chain's opera gambit. "Opera music is beautiful," he said. "Oooh, opera! I love opera. I'm a music man."

—*Adam Iscoe*

THE BOARDS

BLARNEY

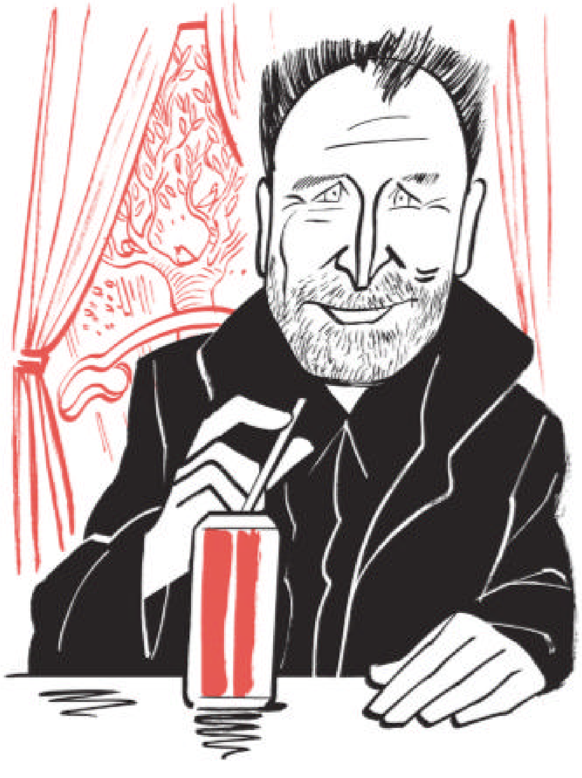


Though theoretically pleasant, small talk—opening gambits, friendly chitchat, weather observations—tends to be the Rodney Dangerfield of conversation: it gets no respect. But the comedian Colin Quinn, raspy-voiced, Brooklyn-accented, and rat-a-tat loquacious, revels in it, including in his new solo theatre show, "Small Talk," at the Lucille Lortel. A few weeks ago, after a preparatory standup set, Quinn, sixty-three and currently bearded, sat at a table in the bustling upstairs bar at the Comedy Cellar, in Greenwich Village, enjoying live music and a Diet Coke, occasionally chatting with passersby. "One of the things I'm saying in the show is that people adapt their personality to the times, for survival," he said. In the social-media age, "the extremists set the tone," but small talk, done right, can help. The live music got fiddle-heavy ("Ooh, a little Irish!"), and Quinn adjusted his own tone as the volume rose and fell. "Humanity started with small talk. It's that common thing, where you're going, 'We're both humans.' You know?"

In the show, Quinn makes wry observations from an enthusiast's perspective and offers tips, of a sort ("Well, folks, whoop! Wednesday night. That's how you small talk—you just state facts. Wednesday night. Middle of the week, aaggh. New York City"); philosophizes ("We're not robots yet, but we're halfway there. Between phones, AirPods, and self-checkout, small talk is down eighty-seven per cent"); and encourages widespread education. Before preschool, teach your kid, " 'Wait—before you go in there. It's not your family in there. This is the big leagues. This is society. . . . Walk in with a little something.' " One of the show's points, obvious but necessary, is that the social world requires effort—dressing up, pretending to be in a good mood, laughing at co-workers' jokes—and most likely involves rising above one's authentic self, "mildly depressed and emotionally withholding," in sweatpants.

Quinn, who has written and performed eight solo shows, on and off Broadway, grew up as the son of teachers, in Park Slope, loving the comedy of Richard Pryor and George Carlin: "My brother and I had these obscure Pryor bootlegs, with Pryor doing these characters at little clubs—it was so powerful. I'd never heard anything like it." He started doing standup in 1984, after he quit drinking. ("I was banned from McSorley's, which was very painful emotionally for me. They were, like, 'That's it—get the fook out!' ") He'd been afraid of bombing onstage. "But, after I quit drinking, I didn't worry about bombing anymore," he said. He performed at the Comedy Cellar regularly, as he still does, and lived across the street from it for a while. "It was a really weird, wonderful time," he said. "The Paper Moon was right around the corner here. Eddie Brill started a comedy night. Downstairs was a theatre setup," conducive to monologues. "Mario Cantone would do these great characters."

Quinn, a comic's comic, became famous to Gen X-ers in the eighties, as the announcer-sidekick on "Remote Control," MTV's anarchic-comedic game show (in early episodes, he smokes cigarettes), and to mainstream audiences on "Saturday Night Live" in the nineties; he applied his gravelly straight-talking brio to political analysis on



Colin Quinn

"Weekend Update" and his Comedy Central roundtable, "Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn," and to hyperdrive smack talk on Howard Stern's shows and the comedy-roast circuit. More recently, he's played funny elder-statesman roles: Amy Schumer's dad in "Trainwreck," the Grumpy's owner on "Girls." But his stage shows, two directed by Jerry Seinfeld, may be Quinn's purest artistic form: deep dives into his mind, on a big topic, with a crowd.

"Small Talk," directed by James Fauvell, has evolved as a kind of dialogue itself. "Sometimes I'll be in my own head," Quinn said. "I've been slandered many times as being a person that's having a conversation with myself onstage." (He interrupts himself, too.) "You want to let people in." He went on, "The good thing about laughter is you get to go, 'Oh, I'm not crazy.' " He doesn't mind not getting laughs for every joke, but "I don't want to live in a delusion." As he and Fauvell worked, they considered various arrangements for joke bits ("The banter thing was better by itself, and then Norm Macdonald, and then Socrates," Fauvell said, at one rehearsal), and at the bar Quinn pulled out a neatly hand-lettered list of bullet points for the show: "WORSHIP-REBEL-KIDS," "EMPIRES-NOTICE THE DISGRUNTLED," "MAGIC-REVOLUTIONARY-MANNERS."

In the bar, people began singing along with "Take Me Home, Country Roads." "It's a weird time," Quinn said, of the pandemic era. "People are saying weird shit because there's almost nothing *to* say and there are no solutions." Small talk's little connections—in the elevator, on the subway—are only good. "It's like two ships that signal each other when they're passing in the ocean," Quinn says in the show. "They can't help each other if a storm comes. But it's basically saying, 'Hey, listen, we're two ships, and we both know all the joy and agony that goes with being ships. I'm just acknowledging you, you know?'"

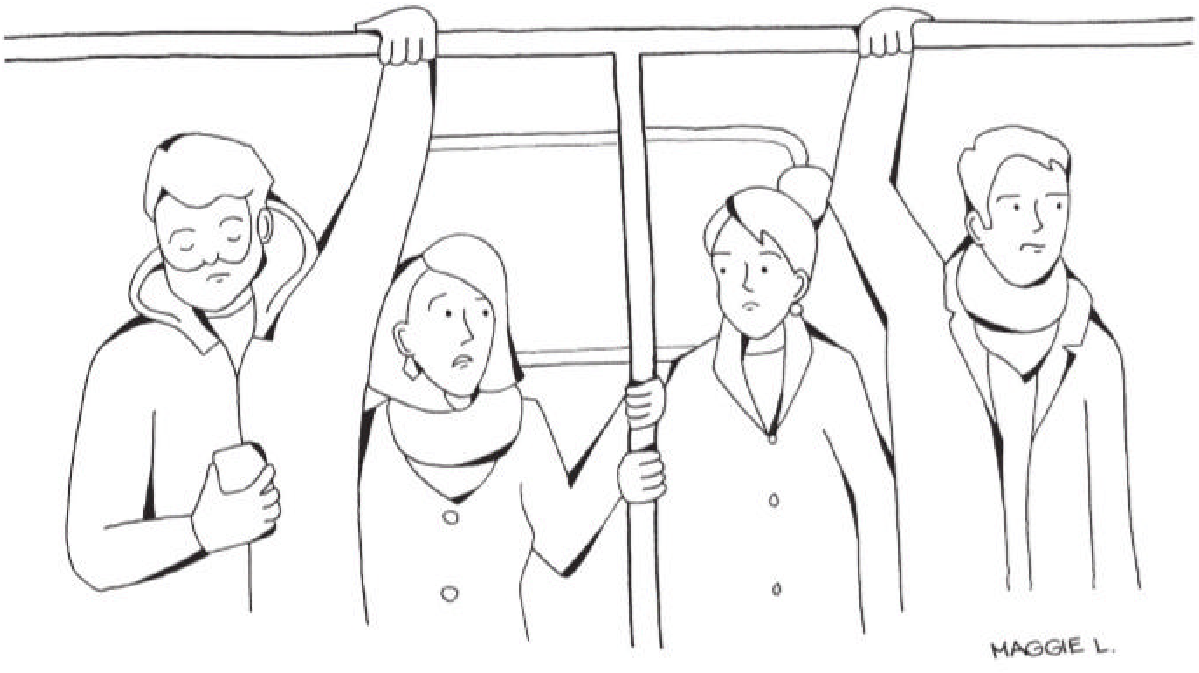
—*Sarah Larson*

MEAN GIRLS
INFLUENCERS, EATING

A. J. Liebling once wrote that "the primary requisite for writing well about food is a good appetite." That's a nice first step for TikTok-ing about it, too, but if you want followers it helps to offer some bite. (See: "The food is terrible!" "And such small portions!") Coming off a time when many reviewers have been pulling punches out of sympathy for the restaurant industry's pandemic struggles, Audrey Jongens and Meg Radice have built an audience for the VIP List, their TikTok-born brand, in part by bringing out the brass knuckles. Their account can draw a million viewers, attracted by the comically scathing thirty-second assessments that pair familiar footage (cheese-pull closeups, overhead plate pans) with caustic "Ab Fab"-ish voice-over ("By far the worst twelve hundred dollars we have ever spent!" "How is this F.D.A.-approved?"). They are unrepentant. "All these restaurants have wait lists for weeks and months," Radice said. "We just want to give the real tea."

The other evening, the duo, who are blond best friends from the Philly suburbs, settled into a table at Daniel, the two-Michelin-star restaurant on the Upper East Side. They decided on Daniel's four-course à-la-carte option over the fixed, seafood-heavy seven-course tasting menu. "I don't need, like, four different kinds of fish," Radice said. Both wore all black and matching silver pendants engraved with the letters "VIP." Neither cooks. Radice had not bought groceries in a year; Jongens's fridge was empty except for Polly-O string cheese. "It's so easy to get incredible meals in New York," Jongens said. "Why would I even try?"

Before TikTok, neither of them had reviewed food. (Yelp? "Too Karen," Radice said.) The account launched at the start of lockdown, when Radice reviewed a Manhattan night club using footage on her phone from the Before Times. Ten thousand unexpected views later, she and Jongens had found their calling. Most of the reviews were positive, but the harder they trashed a place, it seemed, the wider the clip spread. (A sober flogging of Artichoke Basille's Pizza cleared five million views.) Jongens and Radice played up the obnoxiousness, as a gag. "Then it became real," Radice said, laughing. By calling viewers "peasants"—which "we would *never* do in real life," Jongens said—they found a way to keep their commentary cheekily confrontational even when gushing over a meal. "Basically, either the restaurant is getting roasted or our audience is getting roasted," Radice said. "A Michelin-star restaurant can be upwards of five hundred dollars a person. People deserve to know what they're getting."



"At least it's winter."

A waiter brought over an amuse-bouche of tiny beets. Jongens and Radice whipped out their iPhones. Initial skepticism faded. "Truly the most I've ever enjoyed beets," Jongens said. Bread arrived: warm, segmented horseshoes. "Bougie!" she cried.

The first course—lobster salad chaud-froid for Radice, yuzu-and-dill-cured king salmon for Jongens—was chewed with quiet nods. Radice eyed Jongens's next dish, risotto topped with white truffles (a hundred and thirty dollars extra). "It's not *as* truffly as expected," Jongens reported. "But it's fire."

Jongens had previously worked as a hostess for a short time after college, and Radice did admin for a wealth-management firm, but they now support themselves by selling ads on the VIP List. "No trust funds in sight," Jongens said. Radice sipped an apple-pie-themed mocktail and said, "Everyone's, like, 'It's Daddy's money!' I'm, like, I make way more than my dad!" Last year, they found a new revenue stream by curating "experiences"—select combinations of plates and drinks—at their favorite restaurants (Kyma, Oak Tuscan Truffle Lounge); the restaurants give them a cut. "We're trying to build a business that has longevity, so we're not just influencers," Radice said. "Like, I'm sorry, will people still be getting brand deals when they're sixty?"

The entrées arrived: Wagyu strips with licorice-braised red cabbage and herbed corzetti. "Not the best Wagyu I've ever had," Jongens declared.

"You have to chew it," Radice said. "There's no melt."

Jongens glanced around at the neoclassical décor. "Also, it's not that much of a vibe," she said. "It's giving bar mitzvah."

Dessert was ample—pine-needle ice

cream, pear gâteau, and a chestnut-whiskey mousse. When the waiter lifted a porcelain lid to reveal a bowl of complimentary fresh-baked madeleines, Jongens and Radice gasped and grabbed at their phones. "I'll do it again," he offered. Then he used miniature tongs to place four small chocolate batons on each plate, in a grid. "The most beautiful hashtag I've ever seen," Jongens said.

To their followers' dismay, a positive review was in the works. Someday, Radice said, they hope to cover the food scenes all over America, and beyond. "I'll review a yacht if I have to," Jongens said. "I mean, if the people want it, who am I to say no?"

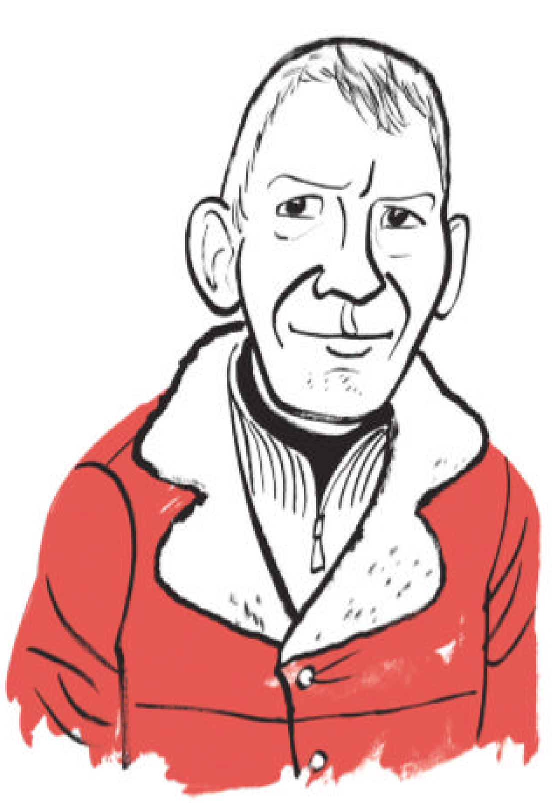
—*Dan Greene*

PERSONAL CANON
PAPERBACK WRITER

Brad Mehldau is arguably the greatest working jazz pianist. Top five, for sure. He's fifty-two—too old to be a wunderkind, too young to be an éminence grise, although his hair is grayer and thinner than it was on the cover of "Introducing Brad Mehldau," his 1995 début as a bandleader, which included some standards (Duke Ellington, Rodgers and Hart) and the originals "Angst" and "Young Werther." (He was going through a lot at the time, including a heroin addiction.) He had the touch of Bill Evans and the range of Keith Jarrett, but he became known, perhaps above all, for his renditions of canonical rock songs: Radiohead, Jeff Buckley, Neil Young, and, always, the Beatles (a head-spinning solo version of "Martha My Dear"; a fifteen-minute "And I Love Her"; "Mother Nature's Son" on vibraphone).

The other day, Mehldau stood in front of 7 Jones Street, a non-prime building in a prime West Village location, where he'd lived in the early nineties. "Last time I came around, they still had my name on the buzzer," he said. Not anymore. A few doors down, in the display window of a record store, were "Meet the Beatles" ("the only Beatles record my parents owned when I was a kid") and "The Joshua Tree," by U2, which sparked a memory: "One time, I'm leaving a gig in Dublin, maybe 1 A.M., and a limo pulls up, unannounced—'Sir, please get in, Bono is waiting to record with you.'"

He went on, "I always had people telling me, 'You ought to do an all-Beatles album,' or 'You should do the pop American songbook,' but it felt forced." He had no qualms about playing the songbook; the jazz greats have always done that. He worried about pandering. "There's a self-conscious inner voice: 'See, there he goes with the covers again,'" he said. "But, with the right source material, the more you take it apart, the more it opens up." (He mentioned the Talmud, Lizst's transcriptions of Schubert, and "The Western Canon," by Harold Bloom.) In 2018, he played a solo Bach concert at the Philharmonie de Paris; in 2020, the Philharmonie asked if he would play another one, this time swapping out Bach for the Beatles. He thought about it for a day or two, and his response evolved from "meh" to "I call dibs on 'Golden Slumbers.'" In February, the Beatles concert will be released as an album called "Your Mother Should Know." The following month, he'll publish a book—"my nonfiction bildungsroman," as he put it—called "Formation: Building a Personal Canon, Part I." He's not the first musician to write a memoir. He is, presumably, the first to quote Goethe immediately after "Bohemian Rhapsody," to allude to "Jonny Quest" in the same breath as "The Brothers Karamazov," and to recount a disturbing anecdote about a methadone-clinic staffer nicknamed Dr. Finger Fuck, all within three pages.



Brad Mehldau

For years, Mehldau and his wife, the Dutch vocalist Fleurine, split their time between a suburb of Amsterdam and a rental on the Upper West Side. During COVID, they were locked down in the Netherlands, and they let the lease on the New York apartment run out. They have two daughters and a teenage son who's an aspiring drummer. "Last night, he and I went to Smalls," Mehldau said. "He tells me what he thinks of the music, and I do my best to stay quiet." Smalls is one of the West Village clubs where Mehldau got his start; his picture is on the wall, and the owner is an old friend from the Jones Street days. The previous night, in a little club down the block from Smalls, he'd played as a sideman for another old friend, the guitarist Peter Bernstein, who still owed him his cut. The following week, he would play a jazz cruise—"Not the sort of thing I usually do, but the offer was too good to pass up"—followed by a week at the Village Vanguard. He left Jones Street and wandered north, looking for old haunts, when, almost literally, he bumped into Bernstein, who reached into his jacket pocket and handed Mehldau a rumpled check. Not cruise-liner money, but a gig's a gig.

Mehldau kept walking, determined to find the Corner Bistro from memory. "Ah, fuck it," he said, and opened a map on his phone. He remembered the late-night burgers ("I'm flexitarian now, but I can still taste it") and the jukebox, which had "everything from Tom Waits to Miles." They still serve the burger, but the jukebox has been replaced by an A.T.M.; the music now comes from Spotify—the free version.

Stepping outside, Mehldau was recognized by a fan named Bobby Tiemann, a thirty-year-old musician. "I don't mean to bother you," Tiemann said.

"It's no bother," Mehldau said.

"I love what you did with—Bach's Fugue in G Minor, was it? You played that one?"

"I tried, man. It kinda kicked my ass."

Afterward, he said, "He was sweet. At least he didn't 'Mr. Mehldau' me."

—*Andrew Marantz*

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

FRIEND OF THE MAYOR

Why did Eric Adams take a fraudster Brooklyn church leader under his wing?

BY ERIC LACH

"I got City Hall in my back pocket," Bishop Lamor Whitehead said last year.

JEFF SMITH

About a year ago, not long after Eric Adams was sworn in as the mayor of New York, an old friend and church leader named Lamor Whitehead went to an auto shop in the Bronx, to drop off a Mercedes-Benz G-Class S.U.V. that had been in a crash. Whitehead led a small church in Brooklyn called Leaders of Tomorrow International Ministries. People called him Bishop. The shop he visited, No Limit Auto Body, was operated by a man named Brandon Belmonte, who was involved in real estate. Federal prosecutors would later refer to Belmonte as "a businessman."

The Mercedes was a twenty-five-thousand-dollar job. Belmonte paid the thirteen-thousand-dollar bill for a rental replacement while the work was getting done. Whitehead wanted more. "He basically says, 'You got to give me another five grand,'" Belmonte recalled. "I said, 'Bro, the job was only twenty-five thousand. Thirteen and five is eighteen. The parts were seven grand. I'm gonna make zero.'" It occurred to Belmonte that Whitehead wasn't trying to negotiate—he was asking for a kickback. He promised to make it worth Belmonte's while. "I got City Hall in my back pocket," Whitehead said, according to Belmonte.

Whitehead explained that he was close with Adams, going back to when Adams was Brooklyn borough president. He told Belmonte that Adams had once offered him a fifty-million-dollar construction contract. "Eric's doing big things," Whitehead continued. "I gotta get mine." He mentioned a property that Belmonte was developing in the Bronx. "He said, 'Eric Adams can make it a homeless shelter, and you'll get city benefits,'" Belmonte recalled. Whitehead offered to broker a meeting with Adams. "He kept telling me we're gonna make millions together," Belmonte said. "And he said, 'You gotta give me the five grand or I'm gonna beat you up.'" (Whitehead, through his lawyer, denied this and other accounts of his actions described in this article.)

On a friend's advice, Belmonte called an investigator at the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan. "I said, 'I think the mayor of New York is on the take,'" Belmonte recalled. "And he said, 'What do you mean?'" The investigator patched in colleagues, and Belmonte told them his story. "I said, 'The mayor of New York City is trying to extort me, through someone else,'" he said. The next morning, F.B.I. agents arrived at Belmonte's door. They asked Belmonte to call Whitehead, and began recording. Belmonte told Whitehead that he was ready to do business with him, and with the Mayor.

Since the early days of his political career, Eric Adams has had to fend off allegations of corruption. In 1994, when Adams, then a thirty-three-year-old transit cop, mounted a long-shot campaign for Congress, his opponent, Representative Major Owens, accused him of staging a break-in at his own campaign office. Nothing came of a police investigation into the matter. In 2010, during Adams's tenure as chairman of the State Senate's Racing, Gaming and Wagering Committee, a report from the state inspector general implicated him in a bid-rigging scheme for a Queens "racino"—a gambling and racetrack establishment. Adams maintains that the report was orchestrated by Republicans.

Some of Adams's rivals in the 2021 New York City mayoral race believed that reporters, constrained by the pandemic and distracted by a crowded field, didn't dig enough into Adams's background. "We all know you've been investigated for corruption everywhere you've gone," Andrew Yang said to him, during a debate in the Democratic primary. With Adams, though, it has sometimes been difficult to distinguish between the unusual and the unethical. For example, city records show that he and a woman named Sylvia Cowan purchased a one-bedroom apartment together in 1988. When The City, a local news Web site, asked Adams's 2021 mayoral campaign whether he still owned the property, the campaign claimed that Adams had "gifted" his half to Cowan.

Later, Adams amended fifteen years of financial-disclosure forms to reflect that he still owned half the apartment. He blamed his former accountant, Clarence Harley. Harley had gone through "some difficult times," Adams said. "I had an accountant who was homeless," he explained. "I let him continue to do his job, even when he lived in a homeless shelter and because of that, it caused him to make some bad decisions." It came out after the primary that Harley hadn't simply fallen on hard times. Until 2017, he had lived in an affordable-housing building in Harlem, where he did the books for the building's board. The board discovered that Harley appeared to have siphoned tens of thousands of dollars from the building's accounts, and evicted him shortly thereafter. (Harley could not be reached for comment.)

Adams has dismissed much of the critical coverage he's received as racism. "Black candidates for office are often held to a higher, unfair standard—especially those from lower-income backgrounds such as myself," he said just before primary day, when the *Times* examined his past fund-raising practices. The newspaper took a close look at the One Brooklyn Fund, a nonprofit that Adams controlled while serving as Brooklyn borough president. The fund received donations from real-estate developers, some of whom had business with the city. Adams denied any impropriety. "I hope by becoming mayor I can change minds and create one equal standard for all," he said.

On January 1, 2022, Adams was sworn in. He soon appointed to important posts an array of friends and close connections. For his deputy mayor for public safety, he chose Philip Banks III, a former N.Y.P.D. official who had resigned in 2014, amid a federal investigation into favor trading and bribery. For his chief of staff, he picked Frank Carone, a Brooklyn Democratic Party power broker who has drawn scrutiny for his business dealings. He tried to install his brother to run mayoral security at a salary of two hundred and ten thousand dollars a year. (An ethics board forced him to knock the salary down to a dollar.) He appointed Timothy Pearson, another N.Y.P.D. friend, to be a senior adviser on public safety, even as Pearson continued to work an outside job—at the same racino for which Adams had been investigated. Lisa White, the former treasurer of the One Brooklyn Fund, with whom Adams once shared an apartment, was installed as deputy commissioner for employee relations at the N.Y.P.D., at an annual salary of roughly a quarter million dollars.

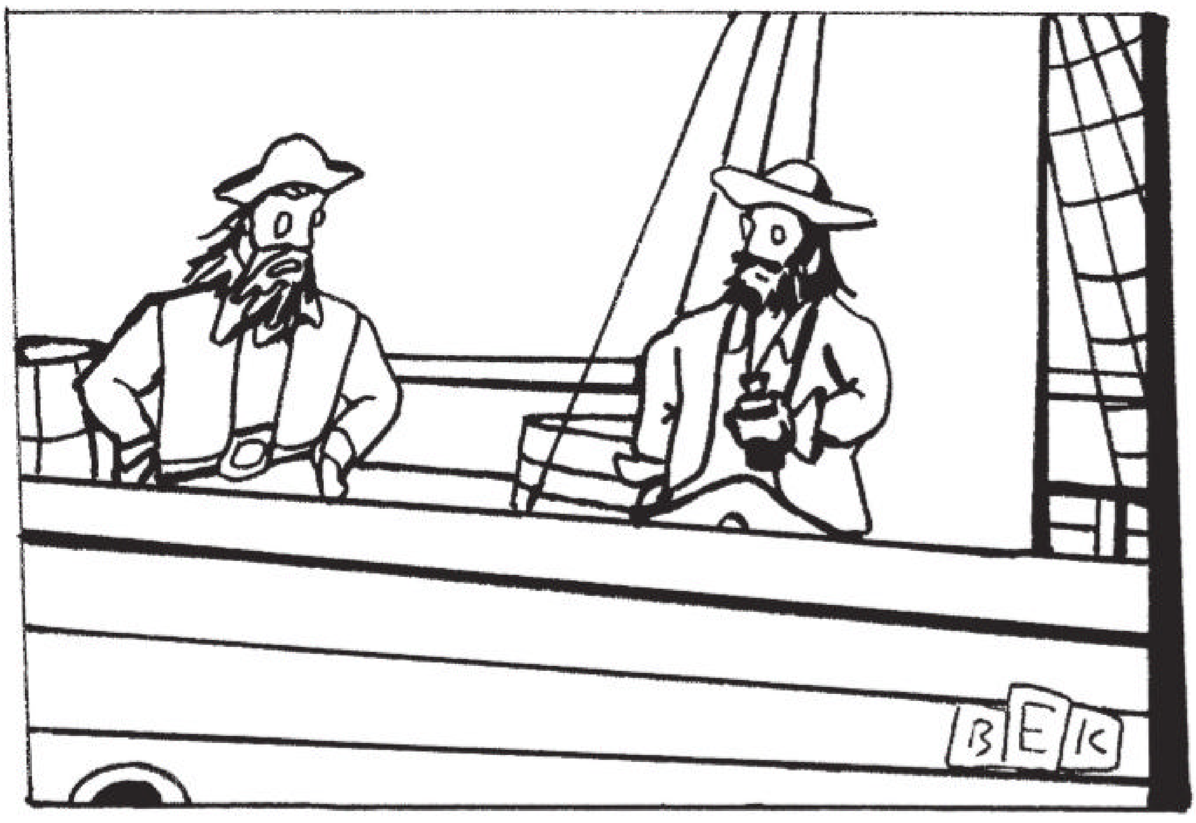
Adams is hardly the first New York mayor to have dubious friendships. But he came into office with a special category of associates, men he had spent time with socially during his two terms as Brooklyn borough president, from 2014 to 2021. He has called a few of them his "mentees." Among them are two brothers, Robert and Zhan Petrosyants, who pleaded guilty to financial crimes, in 2014, and who run a Manhattan restaurant, La Baia, where Adams, as mayor, dines frequently. Lamor Whitehead was also a protégé of the Mayor's. And he made sure everyone knew. In May, Whitehead claimed to have negotiated, directly with the Mayor, the surrender of a man who was wanted for murder. Adams didn't deny this. He described the bishop as just one of many younger men whom he's taken under his wing. "He's my mentor," Whitehead told the *Post* in May. "We've done a lot of work in Brooklyn when he was the Brooklyn borough president. He helped me out a lot."

This was true. During Adams's time as borough president, Whitehead, a convicted fraudster and identity thief, used Adams's name to promote his church, and to give a boost to his business interests. Adams, meanwhile, opened doors for the younger man, offering advice and inviting him to speak at high-profile events. "I think it's important to hear from some of our young people—a young pastor, Bishop Lamor Whitehead," Adams said, introducing Whitehead at a press conference in 2017, in the wake of a hate crime.

This past July, Whitehead made national headlines when videos of him being robbed during a church service, while wearing what was reported as several hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry, went viral. The robbery prompted closer inspection of Whitehead's church; The City reported that a former parishioner had sued Whitehead, accusing him of stealing ninety thousand dollars from her after offering to help her buy a house. Adams called Whitehead after the robbery, to offer his support. "He just encouraged me to keep my head strong," Whitehead said.

Brandon Belmonte was not the first person to go to law enforcement with the suspicion that Whitehead and Adams were engaged in corruption. Both men deny that their relationship goes beyond that of mentor and mentee. "Everybody is trying to connect me and the Mayor with some fiduciary experience," Whitehead told me, a few weeks ago. "We don't talk about real estate. We don't talk about stocks. We don't talk about none of that. We talk about life." Some people who have worked with Adams suggested that his relationship with Whitehead is representative of a character flaw: the Mayor is unwilling to distance himself from people he's let into his life, even when it would be politically wise to do so. "I have no experience of Eric crossing the line," a local politician said. "That's different from the company he keeps."

A few days before Christmas, the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan announced that Whitehead had been arrested. Prosecutors in the office's Public Corruption Unit said they'd caught him claiming to have influence at City Hall while trying to shake down Belmonte. Adams was not accused of any wrongdoing; prosecutors said that Whitehead, while making his overtures to Belmonte, "knew" that he could not obtain the city-government "actions" he was promising. But it's not clear how the government reached that conclusion. A spokesperson for the U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan declined to comment. When I asked a City Hall spokesperson whether Adams or anyone on his staff had been interviewed or subpoenaed as part of the investigation, the spokesperson referred me to comments the Mayor made after Whitehead's arrest. "I have no comments on the federal investigation," Adams said. (When asked the same question following the publication of this story online, Adams said that no one in his office had been subpoenaed.) He called the allegations "troubling," but he wasn't ready to wash his hands of Whitehead, as a politician might be expected to do upon hearing that an associate dropped



“Eh, instead of a bottle of rum, I think I’ll have a mocktail.”

• •

his name while trying to extort someone. Adams said he would let the investigative process play out.

Whitehead is forty-four years old. He has bright brown eyes and a wide, engaging smile. He often spends several hours a day live-streaming on Facebook and Instagram, where he promotes his church and his luxurious life style, and denounces his enemies. “Designer for days,” he once said, giving his followers a virtual tour of his walk-in “prayer closet,” which was stuffed with clothing from Gucci, Fendi, and Louis Vuitton. Whitehead, who lives in a multimillion-dollar house in Paramus, New Jersey, advertises himself as an ascendant community leader in a multiplicity of realms: business, politics, religion, and entertainment. He has said that one of his missions is to serve as an emissary between “the streets” and “the church.” In 2018, after the rapper Tekashi 6ix9ine pleaded guilty to making sexually explicit videos of a thirteen-year-old girl, Whitehead spoke in court on his behalf. “The bishop had to come through,” 6ix9ine said in a video he posted on Instagram. “We had a situation.”

There are people all over the city who claim to have been conned, burned, harassed, lied to, or otherwise hurt by Whitehead. Many have reported him to the authorities, and several have come away feeling that he was protected by his relationship with Adams. “I could tell he was name dropping again using Eric Adams again and trying to discredit me,” a pastor named Robin Brown wrote in an e-mail to the Brooklyn District Attorney’s office, in 2014, describing her attempts to report Whitehead to the N.Y.P.D. “I have lost all faith in the system.” (Brown declined to comment for this article.) “I’ve tried to report him on several occasions at the local precinct, but to no avail,” the Reverend Benny Custodio, of Immanuel–First Spanish United Methodist Church, in Park Slope, Brooklyn, wrote in a comment on a blog post about Whitehead in 2017. “This cardboard bishop is currently at my church doing the same thing he has done in the past, using the church to fatten his pockets. He knows the system very well and uses it to his advantage based on the close relationship he has with our borough president, Mr. Eric Adams.” (Custodio declined to comment when I contacted him several months ago; he died in November.)

Many Brooklyn church figures, and business associates and former friends of Whitehead’s, refused to speak to me for this article, because they said they feared him. “When he got angry, you could feel that menace,” a man named Brian Etta told me recently. Etta showed me documents indicating that, in 2006, while Whitehead was working for a mortgage broker, Whitehead helped sell Etta’s house in Brooklyn and then pocketed proceeds from the sale. City records show that the property was later transferred to a company controlled by Whitehead. In 2013, Etta volunteered for Eric Adams’s first campaign for Brooklyn borough president, and, at Adams’s inauguration, he spotted Whitehead at Brooklyn Borough Hall. “I thought, This is brazen,” Etta said. “A guy who wants to have an image of being squeaky clean, and this guy who is an actual criminal?”

Not long after Etta met him, Whitehead was convicted of a startling fraud on Long Island. Using information that he’d obtained from a girlfriend, an employee at a Honda dealership in Patchogue, Whitehead stole the identities of more than a dozen of the dealership’s customers. He used those identities to purchase luxury vehicles. A prosecutor called it one of the largest identity-theft cases Suffolk County had seen. During his trial, Whitehead got ordained as a pastor, and wore clerical collars to court appearances. “I don’t fear you,” he told the judge at his sentencing, in June, 2008, after being found guilty of more than a dozen counts of identity theft. “I fear God.”

One of Whitehead’s lawyers was André Soleil, a former Republican political operative. Soleil, who has lived abroad for the past several years, was disbarred in absentia in 2019, after being accused of bilking a Harlem nonprofit, and of stealing from escrow accounts he set up during real-estate transactions. “I will note that I’ve been merely accused,” he told me, when I called him recently.

Soleil spoke with regret about the role he played in Adams and Whitehead’s relationship. “I introduced them,” he said. A City Hall spokesperson disputes this, claiming that Adams and Whitehead met at “an anti-violence event with rappers” on an unspecified date “around” 2014. But there are videos and photographs available online of Adams and Whitehead together as early as 2013.

Soleil claims he is also a friend of the Mayor’s. “Eric and I were close,” he told me. According to Soleil, they met in the nineteen-nineties, when Soleil worked as an aide to Rudy Giuliani in City Hall and George Pataki in the governor's office, and when Adams was still a cop—and, for a time, a Republican. Soleil helped organize fund-raisers during Adams's first run for Brooklyn borough president. An e-mail invitation to one such fund-raiser lists Soleil as a "co-chair" beside Tiffany Raspberry, a current senior adviser to Adams at City Hall, and Jesse Hamilton, who succeeded Adams in the State Senate.

Soleil's legal specialty was real estate. He played both sides of Brooklyn's gentrification boom, representing both working-class homeowners and the aggressive real-estate companies that flipped their homes. Whitehead, who for several years in the aughts worked as a branch manager for a real-estate company called Custom Capital Corporation, was one of the few criminal defendants that Soleil ever represented. Whitehead was sentenced to at least a decade in prison, but he got out in the summer of 2013, after just five years. He would later tell people that his convictions had been overturned. He also said that he planned to get into politics.

Soon after his release, Whitehead looked up his old lawyer, and began hanging around Soleil's law office. He would ask Soleil about technical legal and real-estate matters. A few times, Soleil told me, he came back to his office to find Whitehead there, without permission, reading documents on his desk.

Soleil remembers a holiday party that he threw the year Whitehead came home. In a restaurant in Cobble Hill, Soleil's Hasidic real-estate-investor clients and his Black political-world friends mingled. Soleil had invited Adams, who gave a speech. Whitehead, in Soleil's telling, had more or less invited himself. Halfway through the night, Soleil became aware that Whitehead and Adams were engaged in what Soleil remembers as an "intense" conversation. "Shortly after that," he said, "it appeared that they had become best buddies."

Soleil, along with others I spoke to for this story, believes that Adams saw something of himself in Whitehead. They were both charismatic, ambitious, and brash. They had both been raised by single, working-class mothers in the outer boroughs: Adams in Jamaica, Queens, Whitehead in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Both had also experienced early run-ins with the law. Adams was beaten in the basement of a Queens police precinct when he was fifteen years old. Years before his identity-theft conviction, Whitehead was charged with two counts of forgery in the third degree in New Mexico. (The case was dismissed after he made full restitution to the victims.) People close to Adams say that he's conscious of how easily his life could have been different, had he not joined the city's police ranks. "Lamor is like his id," Soleil said. "We all like our id."

Early into his friendship with Adams, Whitehead was living with a friend named Aurora Gordon, who had an apartment in an affordable-housing tower in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Gordon, a decade older than Whitehead, had escaped from the World Trade Center on 9/11, and worked in the office of a tech company. In her spare time, she ran a small organization called Battered 2 Beautiful, for survivors of domestic violence and other forms of abuse. Gordon helped Whitehead found a youth-outreach ministry called Leaders of Tomorrow Brooklyn. They soon spun it out into an independent church. "She thought that it was really going to be something big, and she thought he was an honest person," Gordon's sister told me.

Whitehead, who in his early twenties had worked small jobs in the music business, and modelled streetwear, had a knack for getting close to the famous and the powerful. He referred to the rapper Foxy Brown, a Brooklyn icon, as his cousin. On Facebook and Instagram, he began chronicling his encounters with musicians, boxers, actors, radio personalities—and with Adams, the new borough president. Publicly, Whitehead referred to Adams as his mentor. Privately, he called him E. In one YouTube video from 2013, Whitehead interviews Adams at an event in Bedford-Stuyvesant. "We're going to be doing a lot of things together," Whitehead tells him. "Thank you for being a patriarch for our Black community. . . . Thank you for being an advocate for men."

Whitehead and Adams met up at concerts, bars, and red-carpet events. Gordon told people she knew that Whitehead often got out of bed in the middle of the night, to go see Adams. With Adams's help, Whitehead connected with other politicians, people in the business world, and N.Y.P.D. officials. Whitehead and Adams got together at Woodland, a restaurant on Flatbush Avenue where Adams liked to hang out after work hours. Woodland was the first restaurant run by the Petrosyants brothers, who now run La Baia. "This clique didn't exist when the Mayor was in the State Senate," a consultant who worked for one of Adams's rivals in the 2021 Democratic mayoral primary said, talking about the scene at Woodland. "It formed around 2013." That was the year that Whitehead got out of prison, and when the Petrosyants brothers were indicted by the U.S. Attorney's office in Brooklyn, for conspiring with others to launder phony insurance payouts through shell companies. (They later pleaded guilty to lesser charges.)

Whitehead told people that Adams planned to appoint him to the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, and Adams asked community figures—political operators, businesspeople, and religious leaders—to join a committee called Leaders of Tomorrow, run by Whitehead, which met on at least one occasion. "In politics, you run into everybody at the same meetings and stuff," one attendee remembered. "This gentleman, Lamor, was new to a lot of us." Whitehead's appointment was so obviously wrong, the attendee added, that it "could not have been a mistake."

Brooklyn borough president is a lofty-sounding title for a relatively limited position; it's what remains of the office of the mayor of Brooklyn, a position that existed before 1898, when Brooklyn was still its own city. Today, the job is largely ceremonial. During his eight years at Borough Hall, Adams issued proclamations in honor of Whitehead's friends, relatives, and connections in the music business, including Foxy Brown, who received a key to the city from Adams and Whitehead. Adams would declare July 31, 2016, to be Leaders of Tomorrow Brooklyn Day, in honor of Whitehead's "outstanding contributions" to the community.

A few weeks into his first term, Adams hosted a morning meet and greet at Brooklyn Borough Hall with local business leaders. City authorities later found that the event broke local political-fundraising rules by soliciting contributions to the One Brooklyn Fund. The night of the meet and greet, Adams co-hosted an event with Whitehead at a high school in Bedford-Stuyvesant, advertised as a "One Brooklyn" event honoring Black History Month. Whitehead would use the One Brooklyn name for his own events, and in various promotional materials. (A City Hall spokesperson told me that the One Brooklyn Fund never gave money to Whitehead.)

Among a borough president's remaining powers is a say in land-use and real-estate matters, such as neighborhood rezonings. In 2014, a community activist named Alicia Boyd hosted a meeting in her house to organize neighborhood opposition to a proposed rezoning east of Prospect Park—a proposal that Adams supported. "They wanted to turn Empire Boulevard into Times Square," Boyd said. The night of the meeting, Whitehead showed up at Boyd's house along with roughly ten other people. In Adams's name, they shouted the event down. "He just carried on, he and his friends, yelling, screaming," Boyd said. They accused her of being anti-Black, and of selfishly standing in the way of the first Black borough presidency in Brooklyn's history, even though Boyd is Black herself. Pamela Yard, who also attended the meeting, remembers Whitehead signalling the end of his group's pro-Adams intrusion with martial discipline. "It was like a scene from 'Malcolm X,'" she said. "He did, like, a hand signal, and they all turned around, and they all walked out."

Soleil found Adams to be a surprisingly cautious borough president—he treaded carefully, perhaps because he had his sights set on City Hall. Whitehead was an exception to this rule. "I thought that my friend Eric Adams was out of his goddam mind," Soleil said. "He gave this guy a key to Borough Hall."

The personal indulgence that Adams has extended to Whitehead, over the years, is at odds with Adams's law-and-order public image. "It's time for us to refocus our attention, not only as New Yorkers but as Americans, [on] the decent, innocent people who are the victims of crimes, not those who are committing crimes," the Mayor said in October. With Whitehead, he has taken a different tack. "I was arrested at fifteen years old . . . and because people embraced me when I was arrested, I embrace Lamor Whitehead," Adams said in 2016, after a *Post* article revealed that Whitehead had made false claims about collaborating with the Brooklyn District Attorney's office and the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce.

"As a Black man, I have an obligation to mentor other Black men that have had negative encounters in their lives," Adams said earlier this year, talking about Whitehead. "The Bishop lost his father—Arthur Miller was his name—in a police incident." The murder of Miller, a Bahamian immigrant and prosperous businessman who was choked to death by police officers in Crown Heights in 1978, was one of the most notorious acts of racist police violence in New York City history. The Reverend Herbert Daughtry, a Brooklyn civil-rights icon whom Adams has long considered a mentor, helped to organize the community response. Later, Daughtry and other Brooklyn leaders would call for more young Black men to join the N.Y.P.D. Adams heeded the call. According to Whitehead, Miller's death was an inspiration for Adams to start 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care, an organization denouncing racism inside the police department.

Arthur Miller had four children with his wife, Florence. Whitehead was born in April, 1978—six weeks before Miller was killed—to another woman. "When I first heard from this young man, I was in my twenties," LoLisa Miller-Bradford, the youngest child of Arthur and Florence Miller, told me. Miller-Bradford remembers that Whitehead called her in the early two-thousands, claiming to be her half brother, and saying that he'd heard her family had received settlement money after Miller's death. Whitehead hadn't received money, he told her, and he wanted some in order to buy a Toyota Camry. Miller-Bradford said that she and her siblings offered to fly Whitehead to Florida, where they now live, to take a DNA test. He declined.

In June, 2014, Miller-Bradford and her mother discovered that there had been a ceremony in Miller's honor, on the block he was killed on. Adams and Whitehead had attended, and Adams had given a copy of an official proclamation about Miller to Whitehead. Florence Miller wrote an e-mail to Adams. "I do not want anyone using my husband's name or the tragic cold blooded murder for publicity and/or personal gain," she wrote. "I was also informed (I'm not sure if this is fact or fiction) that you are working with Pastor Whitehead on different endeavors which is not of my concern. However, if any of those endeavor's consist of the use of my late husband's name and/or his tragic death I am requesting it to be stopped."

Miller-Bradford received a call from Whitehead, who screamed at her. Then she got a call from Adams. "Try to work this out," she remembers Adams telling her. "I want to support your family." The call left the Millers feeling that Adams had unfairly taken sides against them, a feeling that has only intensified in the years since, as they've received word of his continued support for Whitehead. "Mr. Adams has not supported anything that Arthur Miller's real family has done," Miller-Bradford said.

There were some who tried to warn Adams about Whitehead, and among those was Herbert Daughtry. Now ninety-two years old, Daughtry has kept up with the Miller family over the years. "When he first showed up, I was telling people, 'Just be careful,'" Daughtry said, of Whitehead. "No matter whose son he is, if he's guilty of doing these things that they say he's doing, Arthur Miller's memory cannot give him cover."

According to Soleil, who grew up in the church and was a minister himself, the message that Adams's treatment of Whitehead sent, particularly to the Black church community in Brooklyn, was that Whitehead could be trusted, and that he had the backing of "strong" political forces. "And that is how he was getting anywhere," Soleil said. In the fall of 2014, Whitehead got approval to organize a gospel concert at the Barclays Center, the new arena in downtown Brooklyn. (A press release for the event noted that the concert would benefit Leaders of Tomorrow Brooklyn, and touted that Adams would attend as a "special guest.") Marquee names in the gospel world signed on, but, behind the scenes, the planning was a mess. Whitehead repeatedly dismissed concerns about how he was raising money for the event, and how he would market it. "He kept saying, 'I have the support of Eric Adams,'" someone involved with the concert said. "He just had no idea what he was doing." The Barclays Center ultimately cancelled the event, despite the hundred and fifty thousand dollars that Whitehead had raised in order to put on the show. (Whitehead, through his lawyer, said that it was his own decision to cancel the Barclays concert.)

The concert was the turning point in Whitehead's relationship with a number of associates, including his collaborator and roommate, Aurora Gordon. "It was your bad attitude and your rush to have money," Gordon wrote to him, in an e-mail that November, explaining why the concert had fallen apart. She listed more than a dozen people who were supposedly "falling back," or distancing themselves from Whitehead. Whitehead responded defiantly: "For your information Eric didn't fall back!"

That month, Adams and Whitehead attended a ribbon-cutting at Forno Rosso, a pizza restaurant opened by the Petrosyants brothers. By then, the brothers had pleaded guilty in their federal case. On November 10th, Robert Petrosyants's lawyer submitted character testimonies to the judge who would sentence his client—including a letter from Whitehead, who claimed that the brothers were involved in an anti-childhood-obesity program he was running. "Without the tireless efforts of Robert and Zhan, this program would never have been offered," Whitehead wrote. I called Robert Petrosyants and asked how he knew Whitehead. "He was one of the customers that used to go to a restaurant that I managed," he told me. "Never had anything to do with the guy's agenda. I don't know why he's linked to us." When I reminded Petrosyants of the letter Whitehead wrote to the judge on his behalf, and asked if he remembered the childhood-obesity program, he said, "Not me, but my brother did something. I don't recall, it was so long ago."

By that point, Whitehead had got back into real estate. He offers online real-estate classes to his parishioners; one attendee told me that the classes solicited participants' personal data, including Social Security numbers, and donations, which were termed "love offerings." In early 2015, Whitehead's ex-wife, Ieshah Williams, accused Whitehead and André Soleil of conspiring to steal the title to her house, in an official grievance with the state court system. In response, Soleil wrote to the court suggesting that Whitehead had acted on his own, stealing Soleil's notary stamp and forging a power of attorney in his law firm's office. (Williams declined to comment.)

Gordon eventually kicked Whitehead out of her apartment. He responded by filing a lawsuit against her, prompting the affordable-housing complex she lived in to investigate whether she'd been illegally subletting. Anguished, Gordon went to Adams, to complain about Whitehead. Adams told her that he didn't want to get involved, according to her sister. Then Gordon went to the Brooklyn D.A.'s office.

Gordon told the D.A. that her understanding was that Adams had promised Whitehead money. "I worked 1 1/2 years for Lamor believing he was in partnership with Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams who [. . .] promised we would be funded by end of year," Gordon wrote in an e-mail to the office's senior executive for law-enforcement operations. She told the office about the hundred and fifty thousand dollars that Whitehead had raised for the Adams-backed Barclays Center concert. The money had come from Ron Borovinsky, one of the founders of a Brooklyn real-estate company called My Ideal Property, which claimed to have flipped hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of homes in the historically Black neighborhoods of central Brooklyn. Some of the company's operators were later indicted by the federal government for duping lenders and borrowers in real-estate deals. (Borovinsky was not criminally charged; the case is ongoing.) In her e-mail, Gordon said she had learned that Ingrid Lewis-Martin, Adams's closest adviser, had tried to get Adams to stay away from Whitehead. "Eric is not listening," Gordon wrote. "He and Lamor are in business together."

The Brooklyn D.A.'s office ultimately pursued two investigations into Whitehead during Adams's first term as borough president. One investigation was based on the information supplied by Gordon. The other stemmed from Ieshah Williams's house-title allegations against Whitehead and Soleil. According to someone familiar with the office's operations at the time, Whitehead was one of several people close to Adams whom the office looked into under Ken Thompson, the D.A. who had pledged to stamp out government corruption. Both investigations into Whitehead ended without charges. "Federal authorities are generally seen as better equipped at conducting complex corruption investigations," the source said. (A spokesperson for City Hall told me that Adams never spoke to the Brooklyn D.A. about Whitehead.)

Gordon died in November, 2020, of complications from COVID-19. According to her mother and sister, on at least one occasion she spoke to the F.B.I. about Whitehead. She kept records from her days of working with him, some of which they shared with me. To her last days, Gordon believed that Whitehead's

arrest was imminent. "Bozo, you're going to see, they're going to get him," she told a friend not long before she fell ill.

On May 22, 2022, Daniel Enriquez, a forty-eight-year-old researcher at Goldman Sachs, was riding the Q train when he was shot and killed by a fellow-passenger. Two days later, police arrested a suspect in the case, Andrew Abdullah. Reporters gathered outside an N.Y.P.D. precinct house in Chinatown, where Abdullah had been taken for a perp walk. Moments later, a gray Rolls-Royce S.U.V. pulled up outside the precinct house. Whitehead got out of the car, wearing a Fendi blazer and a large episcopal ruby ring. He told reporters that he had negotiated Abdullah's surrender directly with Adams. (Abdullah's family had gone to Whitehead knowing that he had a relationship with the Mayor, and had requested his help.) When asked about this at a press conference, Adams said, "All I wanted was this bad guy off the street, and whoever wanted to participate in a system that's doing so in any way, that's good enough for me."

Kristin Bruan, Abdullah's attorney at the Legal Aid Society, told me that Whitehead's actions in the lead-up to Abdullah's arrest were reckless. "He could have gotten someone killed," she said. Initially, Whitehead had told her that he wanted Adams and Abdullah to come to his church, where the Mayor would personally take the suspect into custody. She said that Whitehead seemed to think that Adams was on board with this plan. Bruan, who was already negotiating Abdullah's surrender with the N.Y.P.D., believes that Whitehead's intrusion alarmed the authorities, prompting officers to pounce on Abdullah, guns drawn, outside a Legal Aid office downtown, where he had gone to meet with Bruan before surrendering. After Abdullah was taken away, Whitehead got into an argument with Bruan. "Stay away from my client," she told him, to which Whitehead had responded, "What did you say, you dumb bitch?"

By that point, the F.B.I. was already investigating Whitehead. Early one morning last spring, Brandon Belmonte, of No Limit Auto Body, met federal agents at a Kohl's parking lot in Paramus. They handed him a short stack of hundred-dollar bills, totalling five thousand dollars, to give to Whitehead. Belmonte stuffed the bills in his left pants pocket. He then drove to Whitehead's house. "He just kept talking," Belmonte said. "He got more and more excited when he saw the money. He was, like, 'I have the key to the city!'" Soon afterward, Whitehead asked Belmonte for a larger sum: five hundred thousand dollars, to renovate some apartment buildings in Hartford, Connecticut. When Belmonte didn't send him the money, Whitehead was livid. "He said, 'You just lost City Hall,'" Belmonte said. "And he started going crazy." In the weeks that followed, Whitehead would call him thirty or forty times a day, shouting and cursing at Belmonte whenever he picked up.

On July 24th, Whitehead's church was robbed. It was reported that Whitehead and his wife had been wearing, between them, two seventy-five-thousand-dollar watches, two twenty-five-thousand-dollar rings, and at least three crosses worth a combined value of fifty thousand dollars. Speculation began to circulate online that the crime had been some kind of setup for an insurance payout.

Whitehead spent the subsequent weeks in a frenzy, denying the accusations made against him, picking fights online (at one point he threatened to beat up the comedian D. L. Hughley), rotating lawyers, and trying to salvage his public image. "Chief Maddrey, when this happened, he was over here in ten minutes," he said at a press conference a few days after the robbery, mentioning the senior N.Y.P.D. official Jeffrey Maddrey, who had joined Whitehead and Adams at past events. In late September, after federal prosecutors in Brooklyn announced the arrest of two of three men suspected of holding up Whitehead's church, the bishop claimed to have been vindicated. "This is a win today, because the narrative that was posted and presented was that I had something to do with this robbery," he told reporters outside Brooklyn federal court. "I just really want to thank God."

In December, Adams graded his performance during his first year in office as a B-plus. At a press conference after Whitehead's arrest, Adams was asked what grade he'd give the bishop, as a mentee, "in light of the federal case against him now."

"First of all," the Mayor said, "I think that when you look at my work around mentoring and helping people, it's a fairly impressive one—many of these young people have gone on to do some good things with their lives." But, as for Whitehead, "he should rate himself," Adams said. "That's not my job, to judge others."

Adams declined to be interviewed for this article. A spokesperson for City Hall told me that the Mayor and Whitehead had never worked together, or made money together. "He hasn't met with him since he became mayor," the spokesperson said, of Whitehead. "He's seen him from time to time at others' events where they both happen to be at."

Whitehead also declined numerous requests to speak. A few days before he was arrested by the F.B.I., I waited for him outside the federal courthouse in Brooklyn, where there had been a hearing for the men charged in the church robbery. I'd found Whitehead's Rolls-Royce S.U.V. parked on the street. Whitehead shook his head when he saw me, and got into his car. "Stop with those questions," he said. "No, we never did no real estate. We never did anything. I never did one business transaction at all with Eric."

After his latest arrest, one of Whitehead's lawyers issued a statement indicating that the bishop denied all the new charges against him. Whitehead was soon back to live-streaming, and he hinted that he had damaging information to reveal about Belmonte. (Belmonte has a criminal record that dates back to his early twenties.) On New Year's Eve, Whitehead hosted his church's first in-person event in several months. As midnight approached, he preached from the Book of Job. Some twenty people attended.

Outside the courthouse in Brooklyn, Whitehead had ended our encounter by driving away. I'd walked two or three blocks when I heard him shouting at me, from his car, across the street. He told me to meet him at the corner. He said he wanted to answer the question about Adams more fully. When I approached, he rolled down the window on the passenger side so that I could lean in. "I want you to know, when you ask me about the Mayor, I want you to understand that there is nothing," he said. "He was a mentor. He's helped me as a man. And that's it." Then he drove off. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

THANK YOU FOR YOUR RESERVATION

BY ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

Thank you for booking at The Bailey. You are confirmed for four people at 7:30 P.M. on Friday, January 20th. Before we welcome you to our restaurant, a few housekeeping items, to insure that your visit with us is exceptional—and to avoid misunderstandings.

Owing to COVID, RSV, the apparent return of polio, inflation, the looming recession, and Donald Trump's announcement of his 2024 run, your table reservation will be for ninety minutes exactly. We offer a fifteen-minute grace period for arrival, but the ninety minutes starts at the reservation time. To illustrate with an example, let's say you arrive at 7:43 P.M., because your Uber driver was unfamiliar with the unmarked doors of our speakeasy concept, and you wait in line awhile to hand your coat to our coat-check person (twenty dollars per item; yes, a scarf counts as one item) before settling into your table by 8 P.M. You still need to leave by 9 P.M., because we have another party coming in. The table is recommitted, as we say. In fact, it would be helpful if you vacated the table closer to 8:45 P.M. so that we have plenty of time to sanitize it using our proprietary blend of lemon juice, baking soda, and saliva.

We seat only complete parties. If you booked for a party of six and only five of you are present, do not—we repeat: do not—even think about coming through the door. We also request that your party be complete emotionally. If you are sad, stay home. This is a restaurant, not a clinic. One question we are often asked involves running into people you know or making new friends while at the restaurant. May they join you at your table? Of course. Not. Of course not.

Let us know of any allergies by calling between 7:45 and 8 A.M. on the second Saturday in February and leaving a voice mail for Frank. Frank is not an actual person, and we are unable to accommodate people with allergies, but creating a record of them helps us truly *see* you.

We will make no substitutions of any kind in dishes, because we once read on a food blog that this makes a restaurant seem like it has a "vision."

A note on tipping: tips are very much appreciated. In the name of transparency: a mandatory forty-per-cent service charge will be added to your bill, but will not be detailed on your receipt—it will infiltrate the final price in a way that you barely even perceive. You are, of course, welcome to add a further gratuity. We suggest eighteen per cent if we forget to serve you your meal, or fifty per cent if the server makes you horny for the first time in years. In the name of equity, a hundred per cent of tips are pooled and donated to the large hedge fund whose director's husband started The Bailey as a hobby.

We operate on the strict principle of "speak to your server and only your server." Should you be caught asking anything of anyone not associated with your table, our servers will scowl and ask, "Do we all look the same to you?"

Our concept is small plates, which, if you're not familiar, consists of plates that are small. Furthermore, the quantity of food on each plate is small even relative to the size of the plate. We recommend ordering twelve to sixteen dishes per customer, unless you're hungry, in which case we suggest thirty-five dishes per diner. For a table of four, that would be roughly eight hundred and fifty dishes. Because we are concerned about the environment, we do not offer takeout containers, but if you cup your hands on your way out we will send you home with whatever leftovers you can carry. Consider it a gift from us to you.

Fair warning: The Bailey is a meat-positive space, and we subscribe to the whole-animal approach. So remember to stop at your local butcher and bring a whole animal if you want to have something to eat here. Vegans are welcome—to wait outside.

To enter The Bailey, please bring proof of vaccination, plus your birth certificate, Barack Obama's birth certificate (photocopy fine), your most recent credit score, your last utility bill, your children's school transcripts, and a notarized writeup of your most recent physical exam. If everyone does his or her part, we can beat this pandemic together.

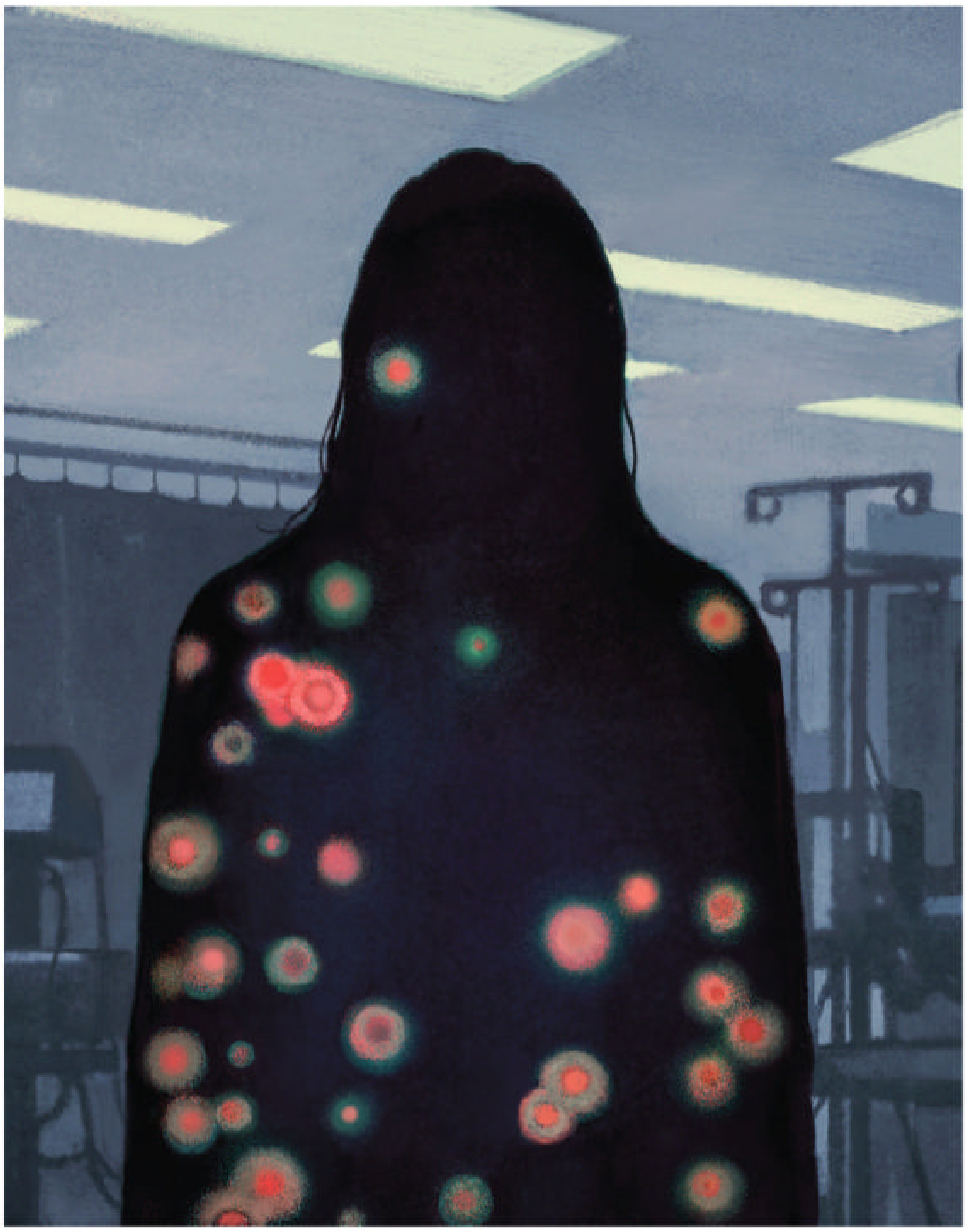
Finally, we are a cashless restaurant. We don't take credit cards or checks, either. All other forms of payment accepted, except crypto, which is not real. ♦

PERSONAL HISTORY

ONE OF A KIND

When you're a medical patient, being unique can have its drawbacks.

BY BEVERLY GAGE



In early 2021, Dr. Michael Ombrello, an investigator at the National Institutes of Health, received a message from doctors at Yale about a patient with a novel genetic mutation—the first of its kind ever seen. A specialist in rare inflammatory and immune disorders, Ombrello was concerned by what first-round genetic tests showed: a disabling mutation in a gene, known as PLCG2, that's crucial for proper immune functioning. It was hard to discern how the patient, a forty-eight-year-old woman, had survived for so long without serious infections. Even more puzzling was the sudden onset of severe joint pain and swelling she was experiencing after years of excellent health. He decided to bring her to the N.I.H. campus, in Bethesda, Maryland, to study her case first hand.

That's how I ended up as a patient in his clinic on a sweet, warming day in April, 2021, just as the cherry blossoms in the Washington area were in full bloom. As a historian and a biographer, I am used to conducting research, examining other people's lives in search of patterns and insights. That spring, I became the research subject. At the N.I.H., Ombrello's team took twenty-one vials of my blood and stored a few of them in liquid nitrogen for future use. Scientists outside the N.I.H. began to study me, too. In the past few years, my case has been examined by specialists at Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania—by immunologists, rheumatologists, dermatologists, pulmonologists, and experts in infectious disease. It has been debated at hospital grand rounds and global medical conferences, and in high-powered conference calls. There are PowerPoint decks about it.

All of which makes me lucky, in one respect. Far too often, women who present with hard-to-diagnose illnesses are told that the symptoms are no big deal, that the problem is in their head. They spend years going from doctor to doctor, in a desperate search for someone, anyone, who's willing to help. This has not been my experience. From the first, doctors took my condition seriously, sometimes more seriously than I did. They pushed me along to the nation's greatest experts, at the finest medical institutions. My insurance paid large sums for tests and treatments; my family and friends were patient and supportive. All the while, I was able to keep doing what needed to be done: write a book, raise a child, teach my classes.

But none of this gets around a single, stubborn fact. "You are the only person known to have this exact mutation," Ombrello explains. "I haven't seen any reports in reference populations of this mutation, and I don't have anyone that I've had referred to me or that I've seen in my patient cohort that has this mutation." In other words, I am one of a kind, and therefore a medical curiosity. Doctors often blurt out that my situation is "fascinating" before catching themselves; they're aware that nobody really wants to be fascinating in quite this way. Thanks to advances in genetic sequencing, though, researchers are increasingly able to identify one-offs like me.

That leaves them engaged in a process not so different from what I do as a biographer, trying to understand a life and its meaning based on deep research but incomplete information. My historical training pushes me to think in chronological terms: Where do we stand in the great saga of human history? How do grand structural forces and ideas and technologies shape what it's like for an individual to live a life, day to day? But nothing has rooted me in history quite like the experience of getting sick. Though illness and death

ILLUSTRATION BY HOKYOUNG KIM

may be the universals of earthly existence, the way that we get sick—and, sometimes, get better—has everything to do with the luck of the moment.

Like any good historical narrative, mine has a day when it all began. On September 1, 2019, I went for a mile-long swim in the Long Island Sound, along a thin strip of Connecticut beach where distance swimmers like to gather. A few minutes in, I brushed up against a strange aquatic plant; it scratched my forearm and left me with angry welts that disappeared about an hour later. That night, my ankles started to itch—*really* itch, the maddening kind of sensation that blots out all thought and reason. By the next day, a hivelike rash was creeping up my calves and thighs, and I could barely turn my neck or open my jaw. By the following week, the symptoms had colonized the rest of my body, with the rash moving north along my trunk and arms while the pain in my neck and jaw descended south into my arms and shoulders.

As a chronically healthy person, I assumed that these were temporary annoyances, perhaps reactions to that odd plant. My doctors initially thought more or less the same thing. As a professor at Yale, I receive my medical care through the university's health center, a private bastion of socialized medicine for faculty, students, and staff. After five or six days of worsening symptoms, I made an appointment with an advanced-practice registered nurse, who sent me to a dermatologist, who prescribed a steroid cream and told me that things would clear up in a few weeks.

The cream did the trick; the rash disappeared, never to return. But the joint pain stayed and grew steadily worse, soon accompanied by bouts of dramatic swelling as it migrated into my hands and ankles and knees. When the inflammation visited my shoulders, I could not raise my arms without yelping in pain. When it stopped off in a knee, I aged thirty years in a day, a hobbled old woman daunted by a flight of stairs. When it visited my hand, I suddenly had a thick, swollen paw.

Based on these symptoms, I was sent to a rheumatologist. At first, I was charmed by the specialty's anachronistic name, with its nod to an age when "rheums" and "vapors" and "humors" constituted the height of medical practice. Though scientific knowledge has advanced a good deal since then, rheumatology still relies on intuition and pattern recognition, as well as on definitive tests and cutting-edge therapies. Today's rheumatologists deal regularly with autoimmune diseases, in which the body's immune system attacks healthy cells and tissue. So perhaps it should have been no surprise when my first diagnosis fell into the autoimmune category. At our initial visit, the rheumatologist suggested that I might have serum sickness, a temporary allergic reaction (maybe to that plant in the Sound). Six weeks later, when the pain and swelling persisted, she switched to a diagnosis of seronegative rheumatoid arthritis, a chronic and incurable autoimmune disease that tends to afflict middle-aged women.

Already, though, there were aspects of my condition that did not quite make sense. I did not test positive for the usual markers of autoimmune disease. Nor did the pattern of my symptoms—random, asymmetric pain that moved from joint to joint; swelling of the tissues rather than of the joints themselves—follow the usual rheumatoid-arthritis course. And the front-line treatment for the disease, a powerful immune suppressant known as methotrexate, seemed to have no effect. We spent months cycling through other standard R.A. medications: Humira, Xeljanz, Actemra—many of them vaguely familiar from prime-time TV commercials.

The only drug that controlled my symptoms was the steroid prednisone, in substantial doses. The trouble is that prednisone has side effects dire enough to put even the most alarmist F.D.A.-mandated voice-over to shame. In the short term, the drug can cause mood swings, anxiety, sleep disruption, and even psychosis. In the medium term, it leads to weight gain and fat cheeks, also known as Cushingoid features, or moon face. In the long term, it rots your bones and teeth, thins out your skin, degrades your vision, and increases your susceptibility to diabetes. Plus, the longer you stay on it the harder it becomes to stop. Prednisone is sometimes referred to as "the Devil's Tic Tac": cheap and available and effective, but at potentially scorching long-term costs.

I got off easy, at least at first. I gained about ten pounds and my face puffed up a bit. My lower teeth started to chip after a lifetime of solidity. These developments bothered me, but they were nothing compared with the prospect of life without prednisone. On a high enough dose, I could function reasonably well; once, I even played basketball with a band of teen-age boys. Dip below a certain threshold, though, and the simplest activities became impossible; there was no more bending of knees, chewing of food, lifting of arms.

A few months into this back-and-forth, I began to keep a record of my symptoms and sensations, hoping to uncover clues that would break the steroid loop. I tried to be scientific, dispassionately recording dosage, symptoms, and external conditions such as food intake, exercise, and weather. Mostly, though, I complained. Entries included "oof," "omg ouch," "can barely move," and "this sucks"—accurate depictions of my inner state, if not shining displays of literary merit. There were days, sometimes several in a row, when things seemed to improve. "Hooray. Gratitude + joy," I wrote in February, 2020, after a largely pain-free day. Inevitably, though, the highs turned low. Even a single day could bring wild variation. "Bad in morn," I wrote on January 14th. "Felt stoic + accepting midday. Eve am kinda miserable but have been worse."

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, that spring, did not help. As a consumer of powerful immune suppressants, I was "immunocompromised," part of that subset of Americans who definitely weren't supposed to go to the grocery store or hug their friends. At the same time, the imposition of COVID restrictions allowed me to hide some of my physical ups and downs. My son and my partner and a few close friends knew what was happening, but the medication cycle was so dismal and repetitive that I feared boring them with too much detail. Instead, I tried to be my own witness. "For the record: I will do my best with this, and I will stick it out over these next months in the hope that we can stabilize the situation and find some relief," I wrote in my journal. "But I'm not sure I'm up for it if this is the next 30 or 40 years. I reserve the right to bow out."

I also spent hours ruminating on what I might have done to deserve my fate: Was it too much bourbon? The cigarettes I smoked in college? My inconsistent commitment to yoga? The stress of my divorce? My rheumatologist says this is typical of her female patients, who often turn to self-blame. In contrast, her male patients just show up and say, "Fix me." The truth, though, was that she could not fix me. So in the summer of 2020, with her blessing, I went in search of a second opinion.

It was a stroke of luck that my right hand was swollen when the day of the consult arrived. The new rheumatologist took one look at it and said, "That's not rheumatoid arthritis." Based on the pattern of swelling, which involved the tissues rather than the joint itself, he speculated that I might have an atypical presentation of a rare disease known as acquired angioedema. It was the first time that the words "atypical" and "rare" entered my medical calculus. He prescribed yet another drug, itself rare and therefore outrageously expensive. My health insurance denied the request and demanded further testing.

That, too, was a stroke of luck—not something often said of insurance denials. As part of an in-depth workup, another Yale doctor, an immunologist, tested my levels of immunoglobulins, key proteins manufactured by the immune system to fight infections. It turned out that mine were wildly out of whack, with too many of some and not nearly enough of others. In a functioning immune system, the body responds to a pathogen by creating new immunoglobulins, also known as antibodies, which are specifically designed to combat a particular threat. When the immunologist tested my immune system by administering the pneumococcal vaccine, in the fall of 2020, I produced essentially no response.

WELCOME TO ADULTHOOD
Effort > Fun.
R. Chst

This was an alarming discovery to make at a time when the COVID vaccine was about to enter mass production and supposedly save us all. But the numbers did not lie: according to the blood tests, I met the criteria for an immune disorder known as common variable immune deficiency (CVID), a grab-bag term for patients with low antibody levels and weak vaccine response. Despite its name, CVID is not especially common; it affects at most one in twenty-five thousand people. "When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras," the medical-school adage goes, counselling diagnosticians in training to think first of the most common scenarios. CVID patient advocates wryly refer to themselves as "zebras."

But what sort of zebra was I? My tests showed the classic signs of CVID, including a paucity of B cells, the white blood cells that make antibodies, and, in turn, low levels of immunoglobulin G (IgG), the major class of antibodies that respond to infection. In other ways, though, the diagnosis did not fit any better than rheumatoid arthritis had. Most people who receive a diagnosis of CVID have a history of frequent, stubborn infections. I did not, at least as far as anyone knew. And there was also the imbalance in my immunoglobulins: though my IgG level was low, another type of immunoglobulin—IgM—was more than three times the normal level.

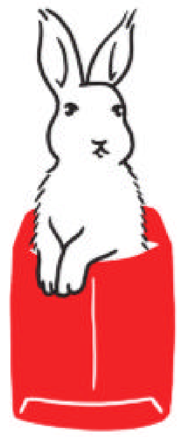
Then, there was the question of how any of this pertained to my actual symptoms: the pain and swelling that had begun so suddenly back in September, 2019. My doctors speculated that I might have a reactive arthritis related to mycobacteria discovered to be lurking in my lungs. Identifying infections in CVID patients can be difficult; many tests look at antibodies, which CVID patients don't make a lot of. To complicate matters, such patients are often treated with infusions of donor antibodies—I myself started monthly intravenous IgG infusions in October, 2020—and it becomes impossible to sort out which antibodies are which.

But there was at least one important test that retained a high degree of precision. That fall, after seeing the alarming immunology results, my doctors ordered a round of genetic testing, which revealed my one-of-a-kind mutation. This was when we discovered that I was not only a zebra but one with polka dots.

From inside the gates, the N.I.H. looks like any suburban college campus: rolling green hills, a busy shuttle bus, a smattering of buildings, mainly brick, with no especially coherent architectural theme. It also features certain dystopian touches. To enter the campus, visitors must pass through a security station for an I.D. check and a full vehicle search, often conducted by armed police officers with canine assistance. The buildings are identified by numbers, designated in historical order of construction. When I arrived for my first visit, in April, 2021, I stammered to the security guards that I was there as a patient—you know, for medical research. "Oh, you're Building 10," they informed me.

Building 10, also known as the N.I.H.'s Clinical Center, is the largest hospital in the world devoted solely to clinical research. To be invited in, patients usually have either a rare or a refractory disease—in essence, one that is resistant to conventional treatment and thus a matter of medical interest. Ideally, they also have an illness of "national and international significance," according to a Clinical Center handbook, with the potential to reveal something important about how the human body works. While N.I.H. investigators study a range of conditions, including common problems like COVID and cancer and alcoholism, many focus on conditions that afflict only a few people and therefore attract little attention from private industry. The federal government foots the bill for all of it. Most researchers do not apply for outside grants, and patients pay nothing for their treatment.

The N.I.H. broke ground on Building 10 in the late nineteen-forties, amid the burst of scientific optimism that followed the Second World War. During a dedication ceremony, President Harry Truman promised that the Clinical Center would be a place "for the people and not just for the doctors and the rich," an oasis of democratic care. During those same years, Congress rejected his call for universal health insurance, though it appropriated plenty of money for the Clinical Center's sophisticated research and high-tech experiments. Even then, Republicans and Democrats could not agree on the virtues of large-scale public-health investment, though they managed to press on with the Clinical Center, given its promise of dramatic medical breakthroughs.



In the aggregate, the idea of the Clinical Center has worked. Its walls are studded with exhibits touting the many pioneering discoveries made possible through the citizen-scientist-government triad. In the nineteen-fifties, N.I.H. researchers used plasma cells to show how antibodies evolve to fight thousands of specific infections. Around the same time, another N.I.H. team helped to break the genetic code. Since then, scientists there have made key discoveries in critical areas of medical research, from early tests of AZT in people with AIDS to recent success in curing patients with sickle-cell anemia.

Even so, today's rhetoric is less lofty than Truman's. Patients "come in the hope that we can cure them," the cardiologist James K. Gilman, who runs the Clinical Center, says. "But we never promise that. If we could, it wouldn't be research." Hired in 2016 after a lifetime in military medicine, Gilman says that his job is to insure that the facility works as well for its research subjects as it does for researchers. This has been a challenge for the Clinical Center in recent years, as the rush to make and publish discoveries has sometimes overwhelmed the more human aspects of care. In 2016, a "Red Team" panel found lapses in patient safety that have led to a round of reforms. And patient advocates have criticized the N.I.H. for pushing incremental research ahead of more immediately useful clinical advances.

Still, to be treated at the Clinical Center is to feel awfully special, a member of a select group. It can also be a lonely experience; you wouldn't be there if you had anywhere else to go. When I began planning for my first visit, COVID restrictions were in full force, so I had been instructed to come by myself. I wasn't prepared, though, for just how alone I would feel. When you're one of a kind, Facebook groups and solidarity ribbons and walks for a cure—the essential rituals of modern illness—don't have much to offer. Becoming a patient at the N.I.H. accentuates that sense of isolation, even as it holds out hope for a medical miracle.

Like many N.I.H. patients, I stayed overnight at the Edmond J. Safra Family Lodge (Building 65), situated a few hundred yards from the Clinical Center—a Holiday Inn and an assisted-living facility rolled into one. The rooms contain the hotel standards: good enough beds, a tiny television with basic cable. They also come equipped with support bars and emergency-alert devices. In 2021, roughly seventy thousand people visited the Clinical Center on an outpatient basis, down from nearly a hundred thousand in pre-COVID years. Three thousand more were admitted to the on-site hospital, for an average stay of 9.4 days. The team studying my case, which Ombrello leads, has brought sixteen patients to Bethesda for in-person visits.

The Clinical Center itself is designed to impress, with a soaring, seven-story atrium as the chief point of entry. Where private hospitals often feature the names of donors, the walls bear tributes to politicians who have visited or otherwise supported the center. But government appropriations do not seem to be distributed evenly. While the main lobby aims for transcendence, most of the working facilities are far more quotidian. The lab where my cells are stored features a stained drop ceiling, grayish wall-to-wall carpeting, and a line of cardboard boxes stacked along the hallway.

My appointment began with a formal registration process: document after document in which I signed my medical record over to the federal government. From there, after a brief check

"One day, all of this was going to be yours, son. But now I wonder—would you rather take Mars or Jupiter?"

• •

of my vitals, it was on to phlebotomy, where I donated those twenty-one vials of blood. The Clinical Center has its own lab on site, separate from the investigators' research facilities. The fact that everyone works under the same roof—scientists and patients, bench researchers and clinical staff—is supposed to be one of the center's key strategic advantages. After phlebotomy, I made my way up to the ninth floor, where a member of Ombrello's team took a detailed case history. A few hours later, Ombrello himself appeared, along with another researcher. (The rest of the team was listening in by laptop.) We crammed into a tiny exam room, all of us wearing masks, determined to get to the bottom of this medical mystery.

Aside from a white lab coat and the deference of his staff, Ombrello might be mistaken for a grad student, all tousled hair and comfy clothes and eagerness to talk shop. He came to the N.I.H. to study systemic juvenile idiopathic arthritis (known, more briefly, as Still's disease), a rare condition characterized by recurrent fevers, joint and organ inflammation, and a distinctive skin rash. Not long after he arrived, another researcher mentioned a family with an as yet undiagnosed inflammatory disorder; its members suffered from strange infections and swelling, along with a rash that occurred with exposure to the cold. Genetic sequencing revealed a PLCG2 mutation that caused disruptions in the immune system at low temperatures. Ombrello and his colleagues named the new disease PLAID (for PLCG2-associated antibody deficiency and immune dysregulation) and published their findings in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. With that, Ombrello became an expert on PLCG2 mutations and began receiving referrals.

Our first appointment together consisted largely of talk. I recounted my story. We went over the parts of my situation that seem distinctive, including the high IgM, the weird pattern of symptoms, and, of course, my one-of-a-kind mutation. "When I said we've known about you for a while, I wasn't kidding," Ombrello told me that first day. "We've actually made the mutation that you have and tested it in the lab at this point." Then he whipped out his phone to show me a graph with two lines. One rose sharply and then evened out, depicting the normal activities of the PLCG2 gene. Next there was my line, pancake-flat from start to finish. According to Ombrello, I have a severe "truncating" mutation, yielding a total loss of function in one copy of the gene. Of the eighty or so participants enrolled in his study, just two others have a similarly serious loss of function, and even the three of us differ considerably in the details.

It's hard not to feel important when highly trained investigators are busy building your one weird gene. "Your cells are gold to us," a member of Ombrello's team told me during one visit. The Clinical Center does its best to feed this sense of purpose. "A Researcher's most important discovery might be you!" a screen in the main lobby declares. Gilman, the Clinical Center's chief, says, "Whether it's a young man or woman on the battlefield or whether it's one of our patients in the clinical trials, I think it's hard to imagine making a bigger contribution at the end of life." This is not what a research-study participant wants to hear: that the rewards will come later, maybe long after I'm gone. But research of this sort is by nature slow and tedious, a matter of piecemeal improvements and repeated failures rather than one big cure.

Thus far, my disease does not even have a name. Several well-informed experiments have failed, each with its own cycle of optimism and disappointment. After my first N.I.H. visit, I embarked on a yearlong course of antibiotics, in the hope that the drugs would not only kill off mycobacteria lodged in my lungs but also take care of my joint pain and swelling. At a second appointment, this past spring, I tested positive for exposure to bacteria that cause Lyme disease, necessitating a month of oral antibiotics, followed by two weeks of I.V. antibiotics. None of these attempts yielded the desired results. Mostly, I came away nauseated and discouraged.

Our latest experiment involves a drug called rapamycin, an immunosuppressant usually prescribed for kidney-transplant patients. As of yet, there have been no dramatic improvements, though this particular drug may have at least one upside. Among fitness types, rapamycin is reputed to have anti-aging properties. After years of feeling decidedly middle-aged, I am now imbibing from a pharmaceutical fountain of youth.

From Ombrello's perspective, treating an odd case like mine can be intriguing and frustrating all at once. "If you think about people who get referred to the N.I.H., either you have something that someone is specifically interested in—a mutation or a disease—or you have something that's flummoxed everyone you've come in contact with and you've received a referral to come here as the last center of hope. And so we're a bastion of hope," he says. "But at the same time we can't always deliver what people are hoping for."

What he can deliver, for the moment, is a research paper: an aggregate analysis of seventy-six patients with sixty distinct PLCG2 mutations. For such purposes, my set of one is not necessarily useful; professional journals tend to want the big picture, not the quirky individual case. And yet the new age of genetic testing seems to be producing a never-ending stream of one-off mutations, most of them "variants of uncertain significance," as the medical designation goes. Ombrello says, "We're now dealing with a fire hydrant," spraying out vast and unmanageable quantities of information. This may someday yield a renaissance of personalized medicine, in which each patient's genes can be tweaked and edited in boutique fashion. For now, though, we are a long way from that ideal.

At Yale, my doctors are forging ahead with their own research. In the fall, Dr. Mehek Mehta, an allergy-and-immunology fellow, condensed my saga into a presentation before the global Clinical Immunology Society—beginning with "Cool Breezy Labor Day weekend, 9/2019," as she put it on one PowerPoint slide, and ending with what little is known about my PLCG2 mutation. Despite the assembled brainpower, she came away empty-handed. "We don't have any answers for you," she said during a recent conversation. "Which is the most unsatisfying part." Her supervisor, Dr. Junghee Shin, is similarly baffled. "The tricky part is that it's very new," she says of my genetic mutation. "So nobody really knows what would be the best way to treat it." Like Ombrello, Shin has studied my cells in her lab, hoping to figure out the relationship among the arthritis, the immune deficiency, and the genetic mutation.

With no clear answers to go on, it has been hard to stabilize a narrative about my current state: Am I healthy or sick? Is my condition alarming or just interesting? As a practical matter, I'm more or less fine on sufficient doses of prednisone, able to live my life without giving my medical-mystery status too much thought. The worst-case scenario seems to be that I will be stuck in this state for years, going about my daily business while my bones erode and my blood sugar spikes and my eyes cloud over with cataracts. Forty years ago, I would likely have ended up in the same situation, dependent on prednisone to function day to day. In that sense, all the tests and appointments, the poking and prodding, the resources of the federal government and the great marvels of twenty-first-century medicine, have not made much of a difference.

And yet it's impossible to unknow what the tests have revealed: that I have one strange gene, with its own agenda. Ombrello says that he tries to avoid the "retrospectoscope," in which patients and doctors reinterpret past symptoms through the lens of new knowledge. Historians often refer to this error as presentism, the tendency to read contemporary attitudes back onto history. For better or worse, I haven't been able to avoid this way of thinking. If the mutation was always there, throwing my immune system off-kilter, what else might it explain: my overhyped and anxious nervous system, the ferocious muscle tension I fought for years, my lifelong unwillingness to work at night? Then again, how did I not know about it for so long? Dr. Shin once suggested that perhaps I've always been sicker than I recognized, that my baseline for pain and fatigue and discomfort might be radically different from the norm. "You might be a very tough person," she offered, a narrative that I'd be happy to embrace, were it not for the impossibility of ever knowing for sure one way or another.

Ombrello says that the "hardest part" of his job is accepting the slow pace of medical research, when there is so much urgency to discover answers for his patients in the here and now. Our standard cultural narratives don't offer much help. In an episode of "House," the Fox network's tribute to the power of diagnosis, the cranky but brilliant protagonist saves a dying Presidential candidate by determining that he has CVID and ordering antibody infusions, stat—at which point the patient heads back out on the campaign trail. But things don't always work out so neatly, either for CVID patients, who must commit to a lifetime of treatment, or for the medical oddities who end up at the N.I.H. Beginning in 2015, the Discovery Channel spent about a year filming four patients at the Clinical Center, each of them suffering from a rare or refractory disease. Of the four, two died, one was cured, and the other was left somewhat improved but facing an uncertain future.

Learning to live with that uncertainty—staring it down, then letting it go—may be as good as it gets for most patients at the N.I.H. Despite everyone's best effort, "you don't have control over what it's going to do going forward and it is what it is," Ombrello says of rare disease. "For me, that's the point that I want to help people to come to." Such a measured assessment may not be quite what Truman envisioned when he dedicated the Clinical Center more than seventy years ago. But the sentiment seems true to our age of diminished expectations, when defeat and discovery so often coexist, when we have learned just enough to understand all that we do not and may never know. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

LULA'S RESTORATION

After prison, a fraught election, and a near-coup, Brazil's President wants to remake the country again.

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

All around the immense city of São Paulo, posters on telephone poles display a Pop-art image of the newly elected President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—Lula, as he is universally known. His head is crowned by dark curls, his face adorned with a red star, a symbol of his Workers' Party. It is a vision of Lula in his early days: the left-wing idealist, the charismatic strike leader, the prophet of an imaginary future in which Brazil would become a center of social justice where no one went hungry, the rain forest was protected, and the enmity between races and classes dissolved. It is an old cliché that Brazil is the country of the future—a future that will never arrive. It is also true that the colossus of Latin America has not fulfilled many of its people's hopes.

For generations of Brazilians, Lula is the country's most familiar public figure. He served two previous terms as President, from 2003 to 2010. In 2018, he was imprisoned on charges of money laundering and corruption. Lula denied any wrongdoing, insisting that he was the victim of a political revenge scheme. His candidacy represented an almost unprecedented comeback.

After a long career of constant crisis, of triumph and embattlement, Lula looks his age. He is seventy-seven, short and sturdy, with a rooster's erect posture and puffed-out chest. His hands are tough, like a boxer's, but his skin is pale, and his curly hair has gone thin and white. When I saw him last November, a few days after he won the Presidential election, he entered the living room of a hotel suite in São Paulo surrounded by a phalanx of aides and security guards. He was dressed in a politician's gray suit jacket and slacks, which he seemed to wish he could trade for his customary guayabera and jeans.

Lula looked not just exhausted but also unwell. In 2011, barely a year after he broke a half-century smoking habit, he had received a diagnosis of throat cancer and undergone chemotherapy. Doctors urged him to take special care of his throat, but of course he had ignored them during the campaign, and often when he spoke now his voice was reduced to a gravelly, theatrical growl. During his victory announcement, he seemed to strain to produce an impassioned whisper.

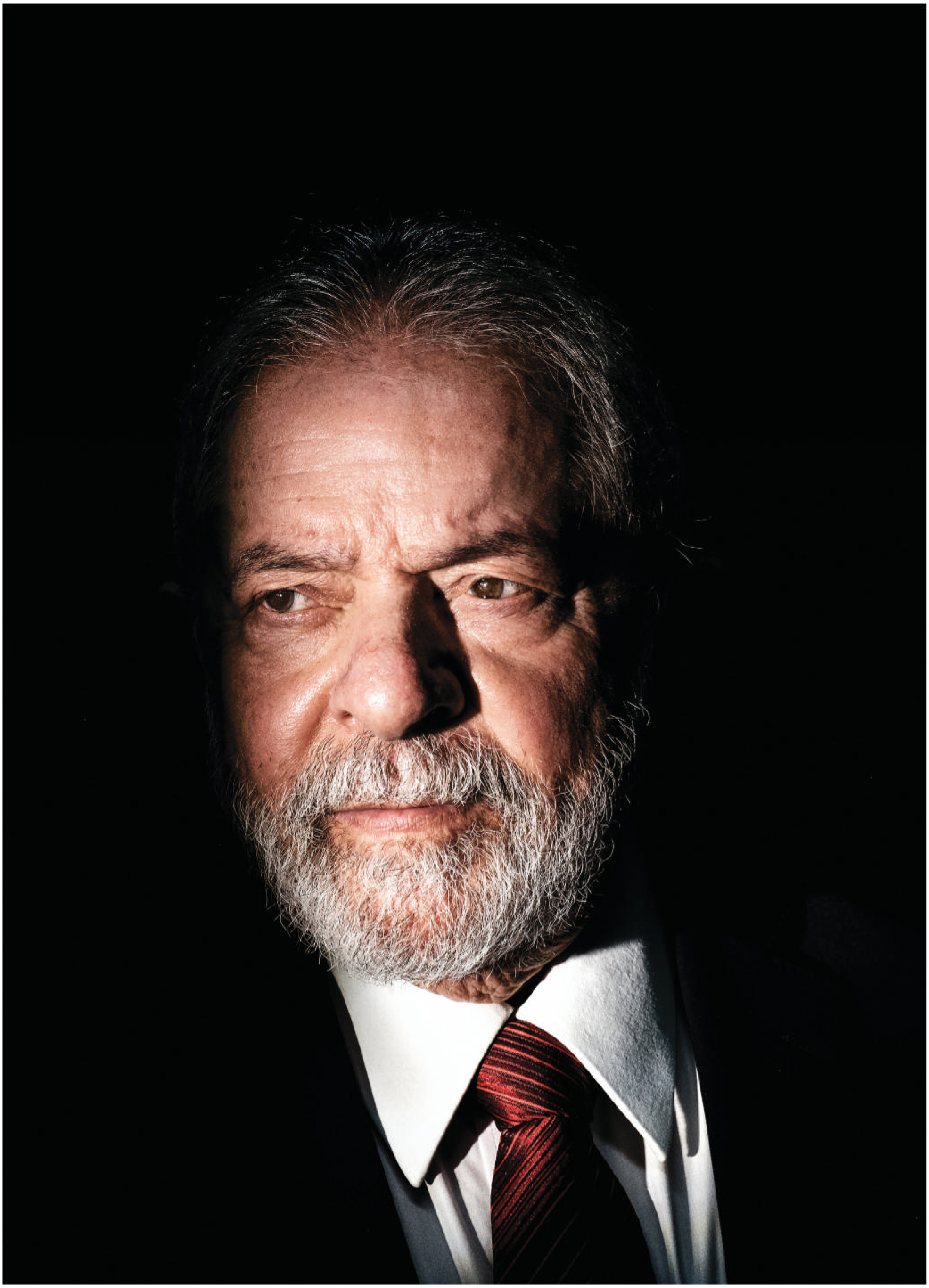
Lula's campaign speeches suggested that he was engaged in an existential conflict. His opponent was Jair Bolsonaro, the incumbent, a right-wing populist who had become known as "the Trump of the tropics," and as one of the hemisphere's most controversial leaders. Like Trump, he had come to power by appealing to voters who were outraged by abortion rights, gay marriage, and sex education in primary schools. Throughout his career, his rhetoric was often hateful. He once dismissed a female legislator by saying that she was "not worth raping, she is very ugly." On the subject of homosexuality, he said, "If your child starts to become like that, a little gay, you beat him and change his behavior." In office, he allowed corporations to hack away at the rain forest virtually unimpeded, and police to shoot suspects without restraint. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, he was neglectful and often cruel, telling his citizens, "Everyone has to die one day. We have to stop being a country of sissies." Brazil has had nearly seven hundred thousand reported deaths, second only to the United States.

Lula, in his campaign, had talked in almost messianic terms about his desire to "rescue" Brazil. He had also begun to speak about God, his age, how he felt lucky to have endured his adversities. On the night he finally won, he said, "They tried to bury me alive, but I survived. Here I am."

When I'd last seen Lula, in December, 2019, he had appeared vigorous and relatively youthful. Now, despite his campaign rhetoric, he seemed a little overwhelmed by the prospects he faced in his mission to save Brazil. Sinking into a chair and exhaling heavily, he said that he'd been on the telephone all morning with world leaders who'd called to congratulate him. When I asked what political initiatives he had planned, he spoke almost by rote, as if still on the campaign trail. But when I said that, outside Brazil, many people expected him to rescue not just his country but the global environment, by reversing the deforestation of the Amazon, his eyes widened almost fearfully, and he exclaimed, "Yes, I know!" Reaching over to grab my knee, he leaned in and began speaking intently of reshaping the country. "People are very optimistic about our governance," he said. "People are expecting something to change, and it will change." This was the Lula from the Pop-art poster, the leftist crusader who had enthralled Brazilians since his first appearance on the national stage, forty years earlier. But now the country around him was different, divided sharply between those who loved him and those who despised him.

On New Year's Day, Lula was inaugurated in the capital, Brasília, a sprawling city carved from the forest in the late nineteen-fifties. In a speech from the Planalto Palace, a modernist building that contains the Presidential offices, he made an attempt at conciliation. "There are not two Brazils," he said. "It is of no interest to anyone to live in a family where discord reigns. It is time to bring families back together, to remake the ties broken by the criminal spread of hate."

A week later, Bolsonaro supporters swarmed the capital, arriving on more than a hundred buses from around the country to overturn what they insisted was a stolen election. Shouting, "Overthrow the thieves!" and "We will die for

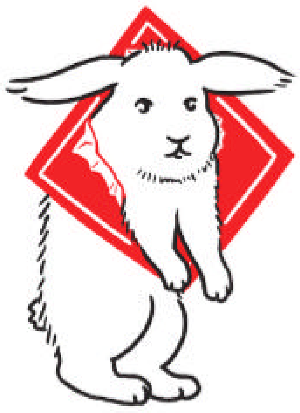


TOMMASO PROTTI

Governing after four years of divisive rule will be a profound challenge. "The weight on my back is greater," Lula said.

Brazil!," they invaded the Presidential offices, the Supreme Court, and the legislature, setting fires and smashing whatever they found.

At Lula's order, Brazilian authorities moved swiftly to turn back the siege, arresting more than fifteen hundred protesters and promising an inquiry into the origins of the violence. Lula also orchestrated a display of unity: dozens of government leaders, including some loyal to Bolsonaro, walked arm in arm across the vast plaza that connects the Planalto Palace with the Supreme Court. It was an effective gesture—a reminder of the street protests that had helped establish his reputation decades before. But Lula seems conscious that making the country function after four years of authoritarian rule will be a profoundly larger challenge. "My responsibility is much greater now," he told me. "The weight on my back is greater."



Last October 1st, the day before voting began in the Presidential election, Lula stood in the back of a pickup truck as it rolled along Rua Augusta, a narrow street in São Paulo known for its bars, sex shops, and raucous night life. Crowds had gathered along the sidewalks and on apartment balconies, and more clogged the street around his truck. Brazilian elections have two rounds, but any candidate who wins a simple majority in the first round can clinch the Presidency. Lula, who is at his best in a throng of supporters, was hoping to inspire voters to put him in office without delay.

Electoral rules forbid candidates to speak to voters on the last day of the campaign, so Lula waved silently and blew kisses. The crowd was noisy, though: music was pounding from speakers on his vehicle, and people in the streets were dancing. Suddenly, Lula began jumping around the truck, like a kid in a mosh pit. At his encouragement, his campaign ally Fernando Haddad, two decades his junior and a head taller, began jumping, too. As they bounced, more or less in time to the music, onlookers cheered them on. Video of the spectacle soon spread on social media.

It was a moment of buoyancy in a contentious campaign, one that had divided voters over questions about what kind of a country Brazil is and what kind it should be. Lula's followers tended to be younger, more multiracial, and lower-income, with a considerable L.G.B.T.Q. contingent; Bolsonaro's skewed older, whiter, and wealthier. As Lula's rowdy cavalcade made its way down Rua Augusta, a Bolsonaro procession traversed a nearby avenue, accompanied by squads of hard-faced men on motorcycles.

Most polls suggested that Lula would win by a comfortable margin. But it was uncertain whether Bolsonaro would honor the results of the election if he lost. Like Donald Trump, with whom he had established a close rapport, Bolsonaro had long questioned the security of Brazil's electronic voting machines—even though they had affirmed his victory in the previous election. In 2021, he told a group of loyalists that he saw only three possible scenarios for himself in the election: victory, arrest, or death. He appeared to be prepping his supporters, the *bolsonaristas*, to reject any result that favored Lula. He had also hinted repeatedly that the armed forces, where he had a great deal of support, would back him in a contested election. His minister of security, a hard-line former general, made threatening remarks about the possibility of military intervention.

In the United States, Trump's allies helped amplify Bolsonaro's arguments. On Fox News, Tucker Carlson warned that Lula would be a puppet of the Chinese President, Xi Jinping. "Allowing Brazil to be a colony of China would be a significant blow to us and potentially a very serious military threat," he said. "The Biden Administration appears to be in favor of it. One person who is emphatically not in favor of it is the President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro." (Days before, Carlson had conducted a fawning interview with Bolsonaro, suggesting that he was a better leader than the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, and posing with him for pictures afterward wearing an Indigenous feather headdress.) The former Trump official Steve Bannon stoked fears that Lula intended to cheat his way to power: "Bolsonaro will win unless it's stolen by, guess what, the machines."

With concerns growing, the Biden Administration quietly deployed visiting emissaries, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, to warn Bolsonaro, his senior officials, and the military not to interfere in the election. As a U.S. official familiar with the outreach told me, "We made a concerted policy to let them know where the lines were for us. The outcome of the election was their business, but what we cared about was that the process be respected. We think they listened."

Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court also joined the effort. Its head justice, Alexandre de Moraes, moved quickly to engage the armed forces, inviting them to participate in an election-transparency commission. To defuse Bolsonaro's claims, he also arranged for the military to inspect a number of voting machines on Election Day. The proposal drew criticism from advocates of electoral independence, but the armed forces agreed. Whatever else might happen, it seemed, they were unlikely to launch a coup.

The concerns about the stability of the government were not frivolous. Democracy has tenuous roots in Brazil. From 1964 to 1985, the country was ruled by a military dictatorship, whose officers harshly oppressed labor unionists, clergy, academics, and the country's tiny contingent of Marxist guerrillas. Nearly five hundred people were killed, and thousands were imprisoned and tortured—including Dilma Rousseff, Lula's successor as President, who was captured when, as a young woman, she was an urban guerrilla.

Some of Brazil's neighbors suffered far worse. In Argentina, between nine thousand and thirty thousand people were tortured, murdered, and "disappeared" by the military. But, while Argentina reckoned with the regime's atrocities in a series of trials, Brazil left its military untouched, passing a law in 1979 to provide amnesty for abuses. As an institution, it has expressed no remorse.

The relatively unexamined legacy of Brazil's dictatorship, in which the hard-right military attacked both leftist protesters and democrats, still informs the country's politics. Bolsonaro, a former Army captain, was an eager participant in the dictatorship, and during a twenty-seven-year stint in parliament often called for a return to military rule. In one famous outburst, he said that the military had not gone far enough—that, if only it had killed thirty thousand more people, Brazil's problems with leftists would have been solved. In 2016, when Brazil's Congress impeached Rousseff, Bolsonaro cast his vote in the name of a notorious military colonel who had commanded the unit that tortured her.

Lula, on the other hand, is Brazil's archetypal leftist. He was born poor, the sixth of seven children. His parents worked as farmers in famine-stricken Pernambuco, a state in the northeastern part of the country. When Lula was a young child, his father set off for São Paulo, in pursuit of a more stable livelihood, and found work as a day laborer. By the time the rest of the family could join him, when Lula was seven, he had found another woman and started a new family. For four years, they all lived together until Lula's mother could find another place—a cramped room behind a bar.

Lula did not learn to read until he was about nine, and he quit school soon afterward. He worked as a street vender, a shoeshine boy, a warehouse laborer, and, eventually, a machine operator in a screw factory. At nineteen, he damaged the little finger on his left hand in an accident with a mechanical press. He couldn't get medical treatment until the next day. To his dismay, the doctor performed a full amputation. In time, his opponents came to deride him as Nine-Finger.

He soon got involved in trade-union politics, organizing protests outside factories and displaying a gift for oratory. He was imprisoned for leading an illegal strike but emerged after a month, and by the waning years of the dictatorship had become a prominent labor leader in São Paulo. In 1980, as the armed forces prepared to relinquish power, he founded the left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores, the Workers' Party, known as the P.T. He soon began running for political office, and, over the years, whether winning elections or losing them, he has become the undisputed leader of the Brazilian left. "There's no one else of his stature in the hemisphere," a Western official who has met with him several times said. "He's the boss."

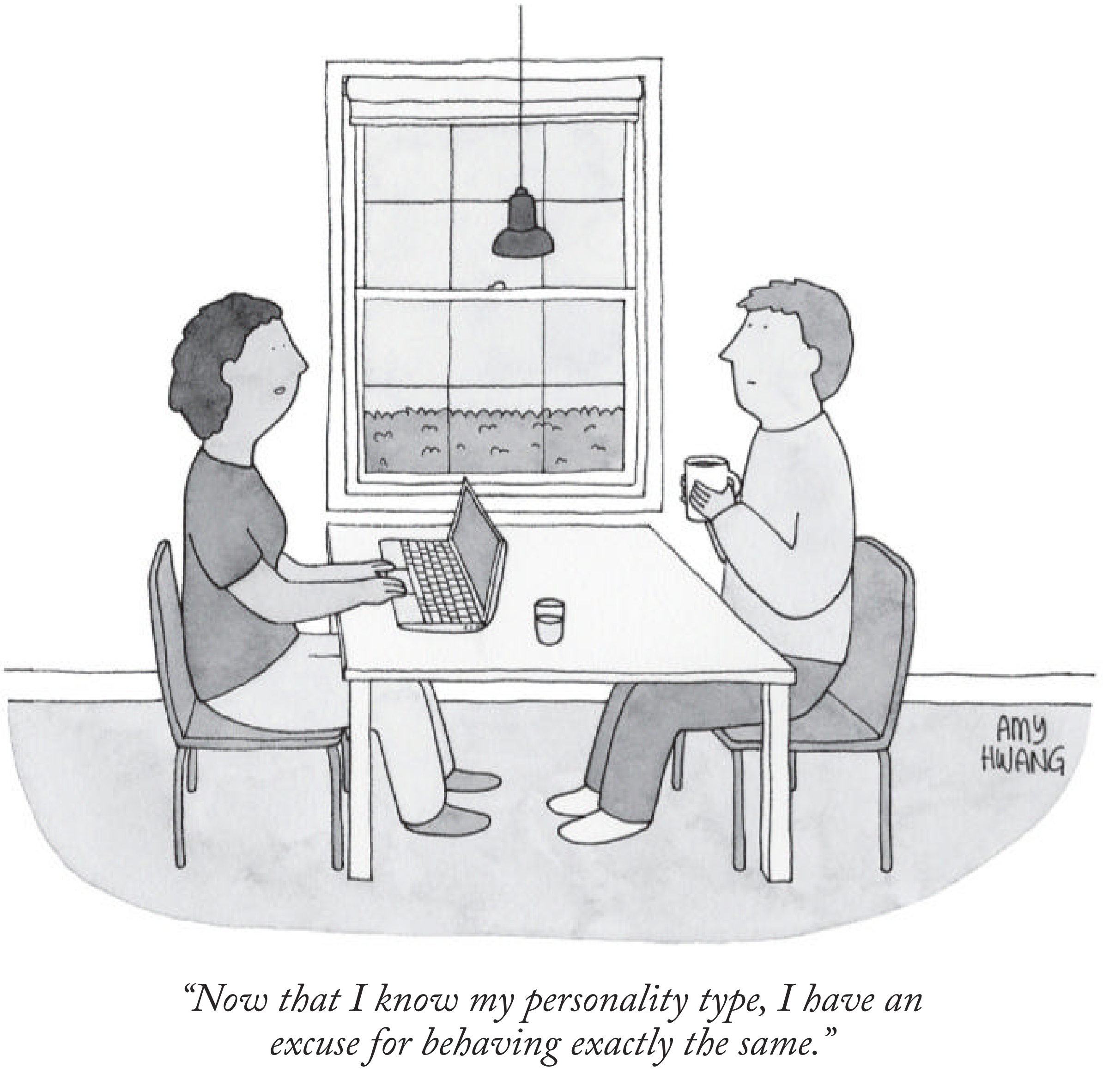
As the returns came in for the first round of voting, Lula's campaign team gathered in a São Paulo hotel. In a briefing room, scores of journalists, hangers-on, and politicians crowded around a huge television screen, watching as the tally tipped toward one candidate, then the other. The sound in the room tracked the results: agitated silence when Lula was trailing, laughter and cries of "Lula-la!," a refrain from an old campaign song, when he took the lead.

By early morning, Lula had 48.4 per cent of the votes—five points ahead of Bolsonaro, but short of what he needed to win the Presidency in the first round. Moreover, Bolsonaro had attracted many more voters than pollsters had predicted. Lula's team was realizing not only that a second round was going to be necessary but that, even if their candidate won, Brazil had become a vastly different country from the one he had presided over twelve years earlier.

Lula left office in 2010 with a historic eighty-eight-per-cent approval rating. The economy had boomed during his tenure, thanks in large measure to surging commodities prices, a significant oil discovery off the coast, and the explosive growth of China, a major buyer of Brazilian exports. In 2010, the rate of economic growth was 7.5 per cent, the highest in decades. Brazil belonged to a group of fast-growing nations known as the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. But, since then, the economy has slumped, and Brazil, once the world's fifth-largest economy, is now its ninth.

Bolsonaro worked to make Brazil friendlier to business, but many of his supporters were more energized by his prosecution of a culture war. He had won the Presidency in 2018 with the backing of the powerful consortium known as the three B's: beef, Bibles, and bullets, signifying agribusiness, the evangelical church, and the arms lobby. In public appearances, his characteristic gesture was shooting make-believe pistols. He enjoyed widespread support among law-enforcement groups, especially the military police, which have a reputation for indiscriminate force and for involvement in organized crime.

In office, he expanded police departments and gave them wide leeway in



"Now that I know my personality type, I have an excuse for behaving exactly the same."

dealing with criminals. In 2020 and 2021, police in Brazil killed more than six thousand people a year—six times the total in the United States. Bolsonaro also loosened gun laws, arguing that citizens needed to defend themselves against criminals and left-wing land invaders. Registered gun ownership grew sixfold while he was in office; gun shops and shooting ranges flourished.

It is illegal in Brazil to make racist remarks, but Bolsonaro regularly found ways to insult his country's nonwhite inhabitants, saying that members of Afro-Brazilian communities were "not even good enough to breed" and that the Indigenous were "increasingly becoming human beings just like us." Refugees were "the scum of the earth." Violence against these communities, and against L.G.B.T.Q. people, surged during his tenure.

As Bolsonaro's popularity grew, Brazilian politicians on the right began proclaiming their adherence to *bolsonarismo.* In the recent elections, candidates sympathetic to his ideas had done unexpectedly well, taking a majority of Senate and gubernatorial seats. One of those who won legislative posts was Eduardo Pazuello, an Army general who for a time ran Bolsonaro's calamitous response to the pandemic. Another was Ricardo Salles, Bolsonaro's first environment minister, who left office while under investigation for conspiring to traffic Amazonian hardwoods. (He denies the allegations.)

In São Paulo state, Brazil's largest electoral constituency, the returns were mixed. The capital swung to Lula. Smaller cities and the countryside went to Bolsonaro, as they had in many other places where ranching and agribusiness drive the economy. In the campaign press room, Lula professed confidence: "We'll have to fight on, but we'll win." His protégé Guilherme Boulos put it more starkly. Running against Bolsonaro, he said, was "a war between democracy and barbarism."

Lula began running for President as soon as he was able. He launched his first campaign in 1989, just a year after a new constitution, adopted as Brazil returned to democracy, made it legal for leftist parties to run for office. He lost narrowly to Fernando Collor de Mello, a sharply dressed young proponent of free-market ideas. Collor de Mello resigned two years later, brought down by a corruption scandal. (He was later acquitted.)

Lula ran again in 1994 and 1998, and lost both times to Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a left-wing scholar who had once marched alongside him in street protests. As President, Cardoso moved toward the center, supporting the privatization of several major government-owned corporations. Lula remained a committed leftist, assailing the "neoliberal" reforms that swept the region, with American encouragement. While Cardoso became friendly with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, Lula was more philosophically aligned with Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez.

But when Lula finally won the Presidency, in 2002, he showed a surprising pragmatism, along with a political survivor's wiliness. He weathered a scandal involving a scheme to buy legislators' votes, which became known as *mensalão*, or "the big monthly payment." Though several of his closest deputies were implicated, he was not charged. In the same years, he launched a cash-transfer program, known as Bolsa Família, that lifted some thirty million Brazilians out of extreme poverty, and initiated an ambitious program to bring electricity to neglected areas of the countryside. During his tenure, the illegal destruction of the Amazon rain forest decreased dramatically, as he implemented programs to police the region and designated several million acres as conservation areas and as reserves for the Indigenous.

Lula's personal warmth is probably his greatest political asset, and, unlike other Latin American leftists of his generation, he showed an exceptional ability to work both sides of the political aisle. Despite his opposition to the Iraq War, he cultivated a genial relationship with George W. Bush. When Barack Obama shook hands with Lula for the first time, at a G-20 summit in 2009, he told officials there, "I love this guy. He's the most popular politician on Earth." (In fact, the two didn't get along that well; Lula told me that he had a better rapport with Bush, who, notwithstanding their differences, was a guy you could have a barbecue with. Obama, for his part, wrote in his memoirs that Lula was "impressive" but "reportedly had the scruples of a Tammany Hall boss.")

At times in last year's campaign, though, Lula seemed to have lost his easy dexterity. At a television studio in Rio, I watched him take part in the last of three Presidential debates. Bolsonaro's insistent theme was that if Lula won back the Presidency Brazil would become like Venezuela—a byword for failed left-wing politics. Bolsonaro strutted grimly around the studio, calling his opponent "a thief, a traitor to the fatherland, and an ex-prisoner." Lula sputtered outraged denials and shouted back that Bolsonaro was "shameless, repulsive," and unfit to hold the Presidency. Few of Lula's loyalists were happy about his performance. While Bolsonaro was characteristically vulgar, Lula had reacted badly to his attacks, and failed to express any new ideas or policy initiatives.

Bolsonaro's accusations—he called Lula a "national embarrassment"—are complicated by the fact that corruption has been endemic in Brazil for much of its modern history. The government owns large sectors of the economy, and many legislators expect to be compensated for their coöperation. "Parliament is either subservient or rebellious," José Eduardo Cardozo, a lawyer and a prominent Brazilian politician, told me. "And, when it is subservient, it is because it participates in the government—it has the money. If it's not participating, it wants the government out."

Lula, in his two terms, managed to cultivate the legislature while avoiding the consequences of the *mensalão* vote-buying scandal. His successor, Dilma Rousseff, lacked his nimbleness. "She was not a woman who liked to talk to parliamentarians," Cardozo, who also served as Rousseff's minister of justice, told me. "She was a cadre who thinks about politics, but who does not perform politics."

Rousseff was Brazil's first female President, and a formidable figure. After her early stint as a Marxist guerrilla, she had spent three years in prison, before going on to serve as Lula's minister of energy and his chief of staff. When she became President, though, the economy was beginning to stagnate, and in her second term a crash in commodi-

Soon after Lula took office, Bolsonaro supporters stormed the federal district of Brasília, calling for military intervention.

ANTONIO CASCIO/REUTERS/REDUX

ties prices meant that Brazil had less money coming in. Street protests became commonplace. So did maneuvering by her political opponents to unseat her. Even her Vice-President, Michel Temer, supported calls for her impeachment, ostensibly for manipulating the country's budget.

One irony of those years is that Lula and Rousseff strengthened the judiciary, which made corruption more visible in their own government. Under Rousseff, the federal police began a series of investigations known as Lava Jato, or Car Wash. For several years, a team led by a judge named Sergio Moro operated out of Curitiba, in the conservative south of Brazil. It investigated corruption across Latin America, bringing down powerful C.E.O.s, government officials, and even several foreign Presidents for their involvement in money laundering and bribery.

Many of the schemes were linked to Brazil's state oil firm, Petrobras, and to the construction giant Odebrecht, both of which had thrived during Lula's tenure. Moro accused Lula of being the mastermind of an international conspiracy, and a years-long investigation began. In the end, the charges were narrow: Moro alleged that Lula was illicitly promised a beachside apartment, and that friends had effectively bought a ranch for his use, where Odebrecht made renovations at the request of Lula's wife.

In a dramatic televised hearing, Moro coolly interrogated Lula, who angrily denied the charges and demanded proof of the allegations against him. Lula's supporters have persistently argued that there is little evidence tying him to the properties. But, not long after the hearings, Moro released recordings that his agents had made of phone conversations between Rousseff and Lula, in which she said that she was sending him papers that would secure him a ministerial post. Rousseff said that the post was routine; Moro claimed that she was trying to protect Lula from arrest. A few months later, the legislature forced Rousseff out, and Temer took her place.

Political corruption did not diminish in Brazil. Eduardo Cunha, who had led the congressional campaign against Rousseff, was found guilty of accepting forty million dollars in bribes. Temer himself was implicated, but the same Congress that had voted to impeach Rousseff opted to leave him in office, for the sake of what the presiding judge called the "stability of the electoral system."

As the 2018 Presidential election approached, Lula remained the most popular politician in the country, with what one poll said was a fifteen-point lead over his closest competitor. But he was increasingly embroiled in criminal investigations. A few months before the voting, police burst into Lula's house to search for evidence; Marisa Letícia Casa, his wife of four decades, died of a stroke shortly afterward. Lula was convicted of corruption, sentenced to thirteen years in prison, and placed in a federal-police facility in Curitiba.

A contingent of supporters camped outside the fence near Lula's cell, greeting him every morning with calls of "Good day, Lula." But Moro's investigation insured that he was barred from public office, instantly making Jair Bolsonaro the Presidential front-runner. In the election, Bolsonaro secured a narrow victory over Lula's stand-in, the former São Paulo mayor Fernando Haddad. Soon after being elected, he made Moro his minister of justice.

A NEW YEAR

Was it myself I left behind? Or was
the country letting go of itself at each clackety-clack
as the train rattled northward into dusk?
Girders flashed by, the ghosts of factories.
Then frozen fields, their stubble narrowly laid out
in an ancient, foreign, indecipherable script.
New solitudes flared on the smutty pane.
As if I were aging faster than the engine's hurtle . . .
While the Hudson shoved its massive, wrinkled drowse
south, dreaming at its own pace: the drowned
river, carrying thousands of years
of sediment through torn uterus of rock.
Angry signs slashed the shadows. Wrecked cars
stacked in yards, tilting fences, sheds
pledged revenge. Then a whoosh of snow
tattered the trees and night swallowed us whole.

Till dawn, jerking me from my berth,
broke over Indiana's frostbitten furrows,
a country graveyard slotted among farms.

—*Rosanna Warren*

Among the loyalists who visited Lula in prison was his friend Emidio de Souza—a genial, burly man in his early sixties, who has served for years as a state legislator for the P.T. When Lula was arrested, it was de Souza who negotiated his surrender, persuading the police to abide by two conditions: "no haircut, no handcuffs." He also arranged for Lula to be picked up discreetly, out of sight of a television crew circling in a helicopter nearby, in the hope of avoiding public humiliation.

Still, the arrest affected Lula profoundly. "He expected to be in prison for a week, maybe, or ten days," de Souza told me in São Paulo. "But his extended imprisonment showed him that the world was going to move against him." He passed the time by working through an earnest undergrad's reading list: a history of slavery in Brazil, a treatise on how oil has led to wars, a biography of Nelson Mandela. He continued to follow party politics, de Souza said: "He wasn't allowed the Internet, but he received daily written reports, news clippings, sometimes analyses of the political situation in the country. He also recorded the P.T. meetings on a flash drive, and then watched them on TV."

From prison, Lula looked on as Bolsonaro began to generate his own corruption scandals. Though he had campaigned as a reformer, he and his family members were accused of a series of offenses, all of which they deny. Prosecutors allege that two of his sons embezzled public funds, and that an aide involved in one of the schemes funnelled money into an account owned by Bolsonaro's wife. The family was eventually found to have bought at least fifty-one properties, largely in cash. (Bolsonaro gave a bluff response: "What's wrong with buying houses in cash?") To cultivate political allies, Bolsonaro's administration maintained a "secret budget," which gave the legislature access to some three billion dollars—a fifth of all discretionary spending—which could be apportioned without oversight.

In June, 2019, the Intercept published leaks of phone messages between Moro and the prosecutors who had tried Lula, which revealed significant ethical lapses. Moro illicitly discussed tactics with the prosecutors; the lead prosecutor expressed doubts that Lula had actually owned the apartment at the center of the case. In other leaks, the Lava Jato investigators admitted that they hoped to bring down Lula and the P.T. The United Nations Human Rights Council subsequently found that the investigation had violated due process.

In November, 2019, Lula was released, after five hundred and eighty days in prison. De Souza told me that Lula insisted he could rebuild his image, saying, "I'm not going to go down in history as a guy who stole." In his first speech after being released, he called himself "the victim of the greatest legal lie ever told in five hundred years of history."

I saw Lula a few weeks later, in a hotel overlooking Rio's Copacabana beach. He was seventy-four—one year shy of the age at which the Catholic Church would no longer allow him to be a bishop, he joked. He said he'd been working out and felt fitter than he had in years. He had also fallen in love, with Rosângela (Janja) da Silva, a sociologist and a Workers' Party member twenty-one years his junior; her daily letters had sustained him in prison, he said. He was still legally barred from politics, but he made it clear that he would return as soon as his prohibition was lifted. "If I were a candidate in 2022, I would surely win," he said. "Because there is a faithful relationship between the Brazilian people and me."

When Lula won the second round of voting, on October 30th, the crowds in São Paulo were ecstatic. From a two-story soundstage above Avenida Paulista, the city's main thoroughfare, Lula waved and blew kisses, as his supporters danced and sang and waved flags bearing images of his face. His voice cracked with exhaustion and emotion as he declared, "Brazil is back!"

For many Brazilians I spoke with, though, the main reason for celebrating Lula's victory was not that it would return the P.T. to power but that it would prevent another four years of Bolsonaro. João Moreira Salles, a documentary filmmaker, the founder of the magazine *Piauí*, and an astute political observer, told me, "That he could win in these conditions is nothing short of stunning. But we might remember the election as the most admirable part of Lula III.

Winning was indeed epic. Governing might be a lot less rewarding."

Lula's team was uneasy. He had won by just over two million votes, making this the closest election in Brazil's history. Bolsonaro had not conceded, and his supporters insisted that the election had been rigged. Along with a large contingent of *bolsonarista* truckers, they swarmed onto highways to block traffic and, in some cases, to erect burning barricades, halting commerce across the country.

For days, Bolsonaro remained out of sight and issued no public statements. Finally, he made an appearance at the Planalto Palace, apparently under pressure from allies. In a brief, stiff ceremony, he suggested that his supporters had every right to express their anger, but should not block the roads: "Our methods should not be those of the left, which have always been bad for the populace." As soon as Bolsonaro was finished, he turned and walked off, while his chief of staff remained to say that officials from the current administration would be meeting with Lula's team to begin handing over power.

There was going to be a transition, it seemed. But, within days, the mobs that had occupied the country's highways had moved to new positions outside military garrisons. There, they set up camps and demanded an intervention to stop Lula—the thief, the Communist—from taking away their country.

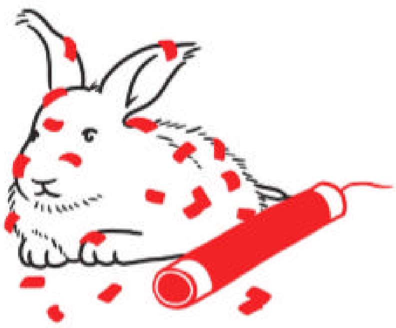
Outside the main gates of the Southeast Military Command, a sprawling Army headquarters in São Paulo, several hundred *bolsonaristas* held a daily vigil. Men and women draped in Brazilian flags or wearing the national colors of yellow and green stood chanting, "S.O.S., armed forces!" Some held fists in the air. Several knelt to pray, their eyes closed and their arms outstretched in the fashion of Pentecostalism, which has a large following in Brazil. Some had their faces contorted in expressions of pain; others looked to Heaven, beseechingly.

Men strode in front of the chanting crowd, urging them on. When I approached several women to ask why they were there, demonstrators nearby became hostile, screaming at them, "No talking!" With rising hostility, the crowd began to yell, "Go away, dirty press!," until I backed off.

As I left, I passed a clothesline strung between trees, which was hung with soccer jerseys, many of which were emblazoned with a 10—the number of Neymar, Brazil's soccer star, who had recently declared that he was a *bolsonarista*. Alongside them was a green-and-yellow banner that read, in English, "Our flag will never be red. Out Communism."

All over the country, crowds had gathered to protest and to pray for an intervention. In the U.S., Tucker Carlson broadcast their claims of fraud on his show. On November 2nd, he said, "According to official tallies, a convicted criminal and avowed socialist called Lula da Silva beat the incumbent President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, by a narrow margin this weekend. And yet millions of Brazilians—millions—don't believe that's what actually happened. . . . There are questions about whether all the ballots had been counted. Why so many were thrown out. Millions. And whether election laws were violated in the process. So we can't render judgment on those questions, but if you care about democracy, if you think the process is essential, then you would look into those allegations."

Steve Bannon echoed Carlson. Just days after he was convicted of refusing to testify before Congress about his role in the January 6th insurrection, he went on social media to claim that Brazil's election "was stolen in broad daylight." He called Lula "a Criminal Atheistic Marxist" and the pro-Bolsonaro demonstrators "freedom fighters."



Brazil's military had largely remained quiet throughout the monthlong electoral process. A week after the second round of voting, it still had not produced the results of its inspection of voting machines. In São Paulo, Lula admitted to feeling fretful about the delay. "This report should have been delivered before the elections," he said.

His concerns extended beyond the silence of the military. When I told him about the protesters outside the Army garrison, he turned grim. "I think we need to find out who is financing and who is feeding them, because this is not spontaneous," he said. The day before, he'd had a discouraging talk with the governor of Pará state, in the Amazon. "When police went and tried to unblock the roads, demonstrators shot up their car," he said. "The entire country is like this. And Bolsonaro has locked himself inside his house. We are not used to this kind of thing here. Since the return of democracy, elections have always been respected."

Lula mentioned reports that pro-Bolsonaro police around the country had interfered with his voters on Election Day, and had assisted *bolsonaristas* who blocked the highways. Lula said that he wasn't worried about being kept out of office: "It may be difficult, but, you see, the law exists to give guarantees to society." The problem was instability, and Bolsonaro's seeming willingness to deploy the police to keep Lula out of office. "This election was atypical," he said, "because it was the candidacy of a candidate against the state—an absurd thing."

Like many others, Lula likened what was happening in Brazil to the Trump phenomenon in the U.S. January 6th had established a destabilizing precedent all over the world. "Whatever disagreements you may have with the United States, it still represents the face of democracy on planet Earth," he said. "When the most important country fails to exercise democracy, you are giving an endorsement to all the crazies in the world."

In speeches, Lula often raises the need to address hunger in Brazil, describing it as an unassailable moral imperative. He talked at length about hunger when we met in 2019, and with increasing emotion in his campaign appearances last year. In our interview after his recent victory, it came up when I questioned him about Ukraine. A few months earlier, he'd made acerbic remarks about Volodymyr Zelensky, and had seemed to suggest, as Vladimir Putin had, that the United States was partly responsible for the conflict. Apparently eager to set the issue aside, Lula told me that he intended to talk with Zelensky and Putin, and with Biden as well, but that all he cared about was "world peace." Soon enough, he returned to the issue of hunger. "I can't, I can't, I can't betray these people," he said, tears welling in his eyes. "I'll have to fight with the markets sometimes, but people have to be able to eat again. I don't want anything much, but people have to have hope again, and a full belly, with morning coffee and lunch and dinner."

Lula remains an earnest believer in the leftist project in Latin America. But, as Cardozo, Rousseff's minister of justice, told me, "Lula is not a man who theorizes about politics like Lenin or Trotsky. He is a pragmatist, a trade unionist." He added, "He is also a political genius and a charismatic man. Inside the P.T., everyone below Lula fights against one another, but not against him. That's how he conserves his power."

Lula's team is mostly made up of fairly doctrinaire leftists, but he has brought in some ideological diversity, in an effort to reassure the business lobby and other conservative interests. His Vice-President is Geraldo Alckmin, a center-right physician who once ran against him for President. His minister of planning and budget is Simone Tebet, who leans to the right on the economy. But Cardozo suggested that he'd need to go further to cultivate people who disagreed with him. "The extreme right is going to be strong and make permanent efforts to destabilize things. To keep the P.T. in its place and the extreme right in its place, he will need a broad alliance," he said. "You can't put out a fire with alcohol."

A couple of days after I met Lula in São Paulo, he travelled to Brasília, hoping to widen his network of allies. Even as he had retaken the Presidency, Bolsonaro's party had won ninety-nine seats in Congress, forming the largest bloc in the lower house; in the upper house, it secured fourteen of eighty-one seats. For Lula to run the country, he would have to make a deal with the Centrão, a shape-shifting coalition of right-of-center parties that have come to wield extraordinary power in the capital. The Centrão has few ideological allegiances; its members' main imperative seems to be exchanging their votes for lucrative concessions for their constituencies, and for themselves.

But the Centrão was increasingly aligned with the hard right. It had voted out Rousseff in 2016 and then protected her successor, Temer. It had also effectively partnered with Bolsonaro when he joined one of its parties, the Partido Liberal, to run in last year's election. Brazilian politicians change parties often. Bolsonaro has belonged to nine. The leader of the lower house of Congress, Arthur Lira, has belonged to five. Lira was a main beneficiary of Bolsonaro's "secret budget," and the person Lula most needed to cultivate on this trip. Judging by their encounter, Lira was eager to make a deal; he came out of Congress to greet Lula warmly.

But Valdemar Costa Neto, the president of the Liberal Party, had decided to stick with Bolsonaro. A canny, amiable man in his seventies, Costa Neto was a former Lula ally; in 2012, he was convicted on money-laundering charges related to the *mensalão* scheme, and spent two and a half years in detention before he was pardoned. "I had to rebuild the Party when I got out, because my image was destroyed," he told me. The Liberal Party had traditionally leaned to the center, but he had shifted it right, and eventually the affiliation with Bolsonaro had paid off. "Now we have ninety-nine congressmen," he said, scribbling figures on a scrap of paper to demonstrate how much funding they were bringing in. He explained brightly, "We have to make room for the extreme right now."

Costa Neto said that he had nothing against the new President. Smiling, he told me that Lula had recently asked if he would back his coalition, but he'd shown him the math and Lula had understood. But, he added, Bolsonaro didn't approve of him talking to Lula: "Bolsonaro's not like you or me. He's not normal."

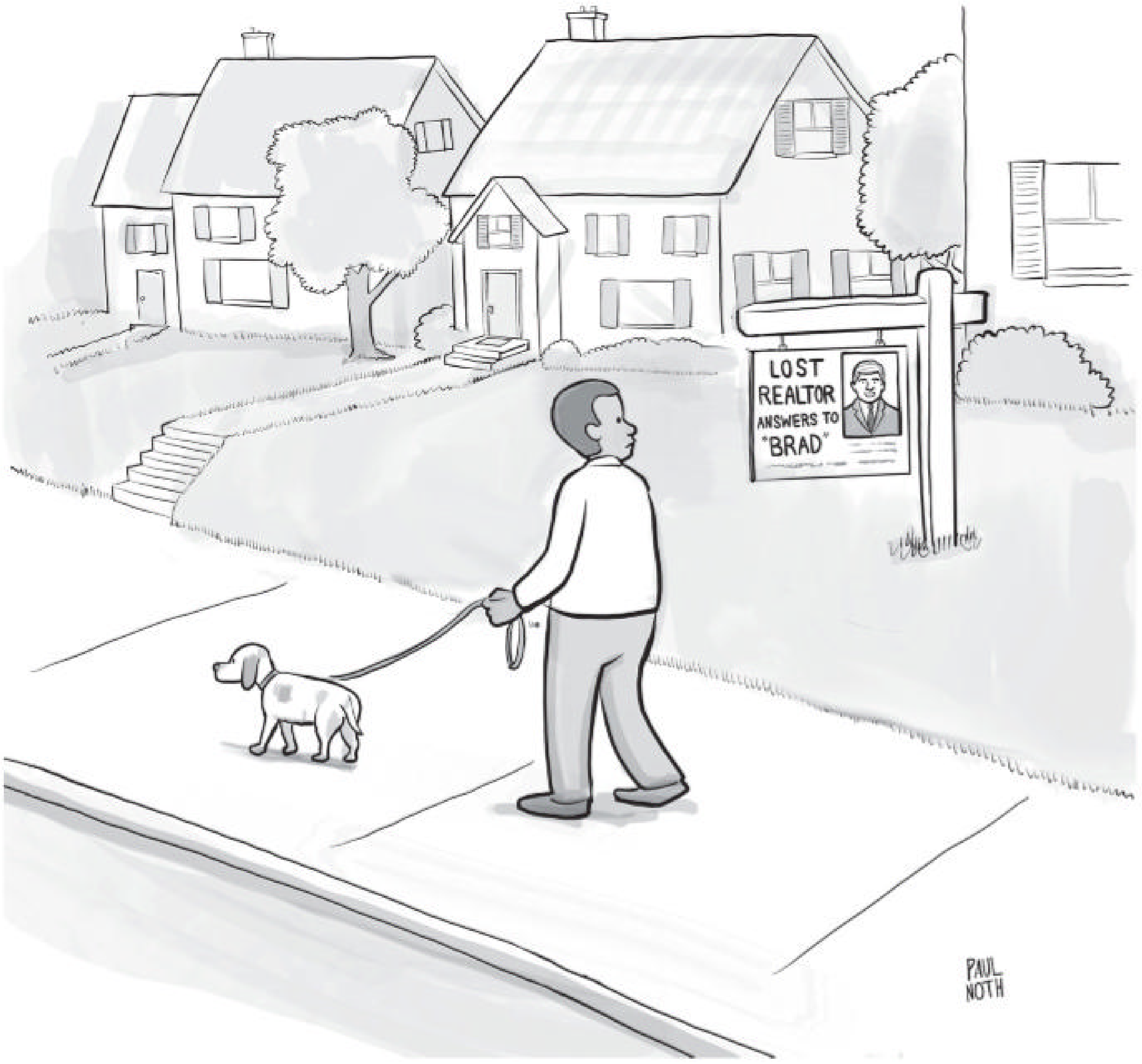
Costa Neto said that he thought Lula had won the election fairly. He recalled telling Bolsonaro to accept the results, relax, take a break, become the honorary president of the Liberal Party, and rebuild for the next elections. But Bolsonaro truly believed he had won, he said—he was wounded and "really depressed." Costa Neto threw up his hands in exasperation. At Bolsonaro's insistence, he had hired a company to investigate his claims of voting-machine fraud, and, Costa Neto said, it had come back with "troubling data." He explained vaguely that the issue had to do with voting machines that had inexplicably identical serial numbers. In a few days, he said, he was going to hold a press conference on the matter.

He confessed to feeling anxious, because the claim of fraud would surely bring "three times as many people onto the streets as those already camped out in front of the Army bases." But Bolsonaro was an important ally, and Costa Neto had promised to advance his cause. A few days later, he held his press conference. The claim was quickly rejected by Brazil's electoral tribunal; the military had already assessed its sample of voting machines and declared Lula the legitimate winner. Still, the report generated a flurry of headlines—enough to feed the *bolsonaristas'* conviction that there had been a conspiracy.

On the afternoon of January 8th, Bolsonaro supporters poured into the federal district of Brasília, overrunning the complex that houses the three branches of government—the Three Powers, as they are known. In the plaza, protesters gathered to confront soldiers protecting the buildings. Others prayed, or yelled slogans: "Brazil was whored out by those nasty, corrupt people!" Rioters forced their way in, shattering windows and setting fires. The district police, led by a former Bolsonaro official, offered little resistance, and sometimes provided aid.

Marina Dias, a Brazilian journalist, was near the Ministry of Defense when she saw an older woman dressed in a camouflage shirt, of a kind that *bolsonaristas* wear in tribute to the armed forces. The woman said that she had been camped out at the military headquarters in Brasília for two months. She had joined the protest on the eighth to urge Bolsonaro to hide; she explained that Alexandre de Moraes, the head of the Supreme Electoral Court, was conspiring to have him killed.

Dias, like other observers, was confused by the timing of the riots. Why wait until a week after the inauguration? When she asked the woman if she was inspired by the January 6th insurrection in the U.S., another protester yelled, "Don't answer her! She's a journalist, a leftist!" Sensing a threat, Dias walked away, but she was surrounded by *bolso-*



naristas, and someone tripped her. "I fell to the street, where people kicked me and punched me," she told me. "Two men tried to protect me, saying, 'You will kill her and ruin our movement.'" But women were scratching her, pulling her hair, grabbing for her phone. Someone snatched her glasses, broke them, and yelled, "We have to kill her!"

Finally, a military officer forced his way through the crowd and pulled her away. As the officer escorted her off, "people yelled that I was a whore, and someone threw a bottle of water at me," she told me. "It was clear they felt like there would be no punishment."

On the day of the insurrection, Lula and Janja were visiting the city of Araraquara, in São Paulo state, five hundred miles away. But they were able to monitor the situation, an aide told me. One of Lula's bodyguards entered the Planalto Palace, recorded the rampage, and shared it with the President in real time. No one noticed the bodyguard, the aide said, because "they were all filming themselves, too."

Outside the President's offices, on the third floor, the rioters wrecked furniture and destroyed art: a seventeenth-century French clock, a painting by Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, an ancient Chinese vase. The vandals broke nearly everything they encountered, but they were stopped at a glass door outside Lula's private office by his personal security team—a group of longtime loyalists, which includes a former federal police officer who oversaw Lula's imprisonment and then went to work for him after he was freed.

From São Paulo, Lula and his team worked to assert control, starting by organizing the dismissal of the Bolsonaro official who led the district police and replacing him with a loyalist. As they scrambled, Lula received a phone call from his minister of defense and the chief of staff of the armed forces. They proposed that he sign a "law-and-order assurance"—a directive that would effectively hand them power to reëstablish control. Lula refused, fearing that it was the first step in a coup. Instead, he ordered military police to retake the buildings of the Three Powers. The Supreme Court and the Planalto Palace were quickly secured, and then officers turned their focus on Congress, deploying horses, water cannons, and pepper spray to clear the building and the roof. As helicopters dropped tear gas, protesters ran, coughing and struggling for air. By about seven o'clock that evening, the building had been cleared.

Despite the ferocity of the violence, many Brazilians believed that it was less an attempted coup than an act of political theatre. People took selfies and FaceTimed friends. One rioter, streaming video as he entered Congress, asked viewers to subscribe to his YouTube channel. Venders sold spectators grilled chicken and cotton candy. "On the surface, 1/8 was a resounding failure," João Moreira Salles said. "The mob ransacked empty buildings and didn't even try to occupy them. It was more of a simulacrum of a coup, a spectacle—a coup for the Instagram age."

The lawlessness of the attack had demonstrated Bolsonaro's hold on his loyalists, but it had also damaged him politically. "It means the end of Bolsonaro as a democratically viable candidate," Moreira Salles argued. Soon after the elections, Bolsonaro had fled to Florida, and reportedly was staying near Orlando, as the guest of the Brazilian mixed-martial-arts fighter José Aldo. After four turbulent years as President, he suddenly didn't seem to have much to do. He looked for a church to join. One afternoon, he was spotted sitting alone at a KFC, eating fried chicken out of a box. Admirers reported, with astonishment, that they had been able to drop by his house for a chat. "He's completely isolated, and his influence is reduced to the fringe of Brazil's extreme right," Moreira Salles said. "Flying to Disney when the going gets tough is not exactly conducive to becoming the next strongman."

The Biden Administration has said that it would take seriously a request to extradite Bolsonaro, but Lula has not yet submitted one. Even from Orlando, though, Bolsonaro can have an effect on Brazilian politics. Like many of his supporters, he is a skilled provocateur. During his Presidency, his opponents faced such vicious attacks online that Brazilians spoke about a clandestine "office of hate," run by Bolsonaro's allies. The P.T. is less adroit on social media. (Its leaders are largely older; one told me that sixty is considered young.) Members of Lula's administration told me that the solution was greater regulation of the media, particularly on the Internet. "You can allow total freedom, but you cannot allow evil, hatred, the encouragement of lies to gain space," Lula said.

In Moreira Salles's view, people who were radicalized online were unlikely to succeed in toppling the government. "The danger is of an endless repetition of smaller January 8ths around the country," he said. "Roads blocked, refineries occupied, that sort of thing. If they can't seize power, then the next best thing is to make the current Presidency utterly chaotic."

Still, the threat of political violence remains real; in December, police stopped a bomb plot against Lula. People close to him are particularly concerned about the military, and perplexed by its reluctance to quell the violence on January 8th. It has bases near the Three Powers buildings, and its troops secured the compound during a demonstration in 2017—but this time, despite repeated requests in the preceding days to step up security, it had intervened late, and seemingly half-heartedly. At least fifteen members of the military and the security forces are linked to the insurrection, including a retired senior officer of the Navy and a retired general of the Army reserves.

When Bolsonaro was President, he handed over large swaths of the government to the armed forces, appointing more than six thousand military personnel to the civilian bureaucracy. To assert control, Lula knows that he will have to purge some officers and cultivate many others. It will be delicate, unpopular work. "The armed forces didn't join Bolsonaro's efforts to remain in power, otherwise he would still be in Brasília," Moreira Salles said. "But they are not coming forward to condemn the events of January 8th. Lula has to decipher this silence and bring the military to his side. It's going to be one of his hardest tasks. History shows that the armed forces in Latin America are not guarantors of democracy."

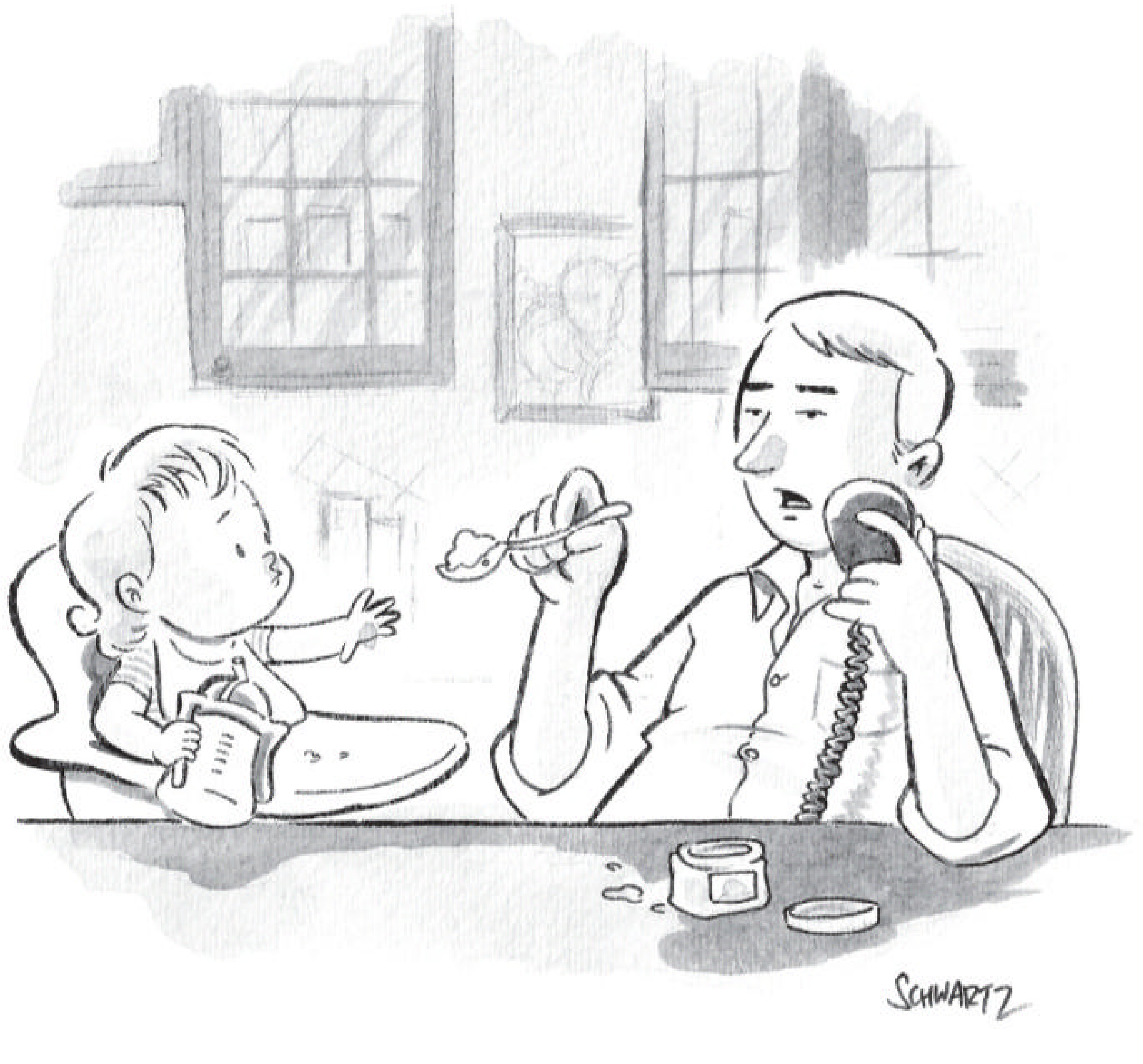
Some of the politicians who benefitted from Bolsonaro's rise are figuring out how to keep up their momentum without him. Sergio Moro, the judge who put Lula in jail, was for a time a kind of folk hero for right-wing Brazil. In the recent election, he launched a campaign for President before dropping out to support Bolsonaro, whom he coached through the debates. He also ran for the Senate, and won a seat, representing his home state of Paraná, in southern Brazil.

I met him in his office in Curitiba, the state capital, in a modern tower that stood above a downtown of tidy lawns, churches, and steak houses. A neatly groomed man with a deacon's seriousness, he was imperturbable as we talked about his role in the political combat of the past few years.

When I asked why he had agreed to serve as Bolsonaro's justice minister, Moro said that he had hoped to do some good for the country: "Who wouldn't try that?" Before 2018, he said, he'd known almost nothing about Bolsonaro. When I noted that Bolsonaro was already famous for offensive behavior, Moro fidgeted. "I heard from a lot of people who said, 'I'm relieved that you're joining the government, because you will be the voice of moderation.' And I never endorsed any kind of attacks, verbal attacks of the President against women or anything like that," he said.

Moro pointed out that he had quit his post after a year and a half, after Bolsonaro forestalled a police investigation into one of his sons' activities. When I asked if he believed that Bolsonaro was guilty of the offenses he had been accused of, he nodded. Then why had he rejoined him during the debates with Lula? "I have never recanted what I said in the past," he said. "The past is the past. But, if you have a second round with two options, you need to make a choice." But why imprison one politician you regard as corrupt and aid another? "Well, we are talking about different levels of corruption. And you need to consider other issues. I don't believe in the economic thoughts of the Workers' Party."

Moro did not deny that Lula had won the election, yet he spoke sympathetically about the people who questioned his legitimacy. "I am against any kind of violence or any kind of coup," he said. "But there are a lot of people unsatisfied with the return of Lula, because there's this perception that the



"Here comes the airplane—once it gets clearance from the tower, which should be in another forty-five minutes. Thank you for your patience."

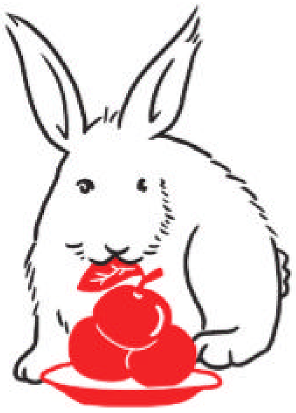
corruption scandals were not solved in a proper way. So these people believe that Lula should never have been a candidate." Even before January 8th, he acknowledged that the protesters had "committed some mistakes." But, he said, "I believe Brazilian democracy should give these people an answer and understand them, and not treat all of them as kind of villains. They are not. They have families—they have children."

People close to Lula were grappling with the same essential concern: How could they bring Bolsonaro voters over to their side? Lula's protégé Guilherme Boulos is a forty-year-old activist and politician. We met for breakfast in a buffet-style "kilo" restaurant, where customers pay according to the weight of the food piled on their plates. He lamented, "Before, the opposition was, if you will, civilized. We have a real problem in the countryside."

As the founder of the Homeless Workers' Movement, Boulos spent years organizing takeovers of disused buildings to provide shelter for Brazilians in need. He won a legislative seat in the recent elections, and will work closely with Lula. When I asked about the *bolsonaristas*, he said, "We have to learn to talk to those people." But he suggested, in the tones of a New Yorker talking about Texans, that Brazil's rural areas were effectively a different country. "It's a mostly right-wing culture, which revolves around the idea that one's properties must be protected from left-wing land invasions," he said. "Its economic program is neoliberal, and it is socially moralistic. Therein lies our problem: the left hasn't attended to this sector, and it really has to, if it wants to defeat *bolsonarismo*."

Lula, he said, "has an extraordinary capacity to govern and to articulate points in common with different sectors." But the past four years had made bridging the differences much more difficult: "Bolsonaro didn't govern—he set out the guideposts for an ideological battle, and he almost beat us by nearly winning reëlection!"

Boulos estimated that *bolsonarista* extremists represented ten to twelve per cent of the Brazilian population: "These are the people who don't believe in the pandemic, who defend the use of torture, and who believe that the Earth is flat." The key, he said, was to improve their economic opportunities. "There are those who say Brazil has increasingly become a polarized country. I'd argue that it's always been polarized. Think of it: this country is the third-largest food producer in the world, while thirty million of its citizens go hungry, and one per cent of the population owns most of the resources. Of course there's going to be polarization!" He reminded me that when Lula left office the electorate had overwhelmingly supported him—"because their lives were better!" Now, though, there was less money flowing; the economy was in a downturn, and the country was still recovering from the pandemic. "Lula's margin of maneuverability will be reduced," he said.



In the weeks after Lula won the election, he often seemed as if he hoped to simply return the country to the time before Bolsonaro took over—when the Amazon was less imperilled, the economy was thriving, and Brazil was in a cohort of fast-ascending countries. "It was the best moment of social rise of the poor people in Latin America," he told me in São Paulo, adding, "Let's recover the BRICS!"

Four days after the January 8th insurrection, his administration released its economic plan, which called for restoring the Bolsa Família, increasing aid to the poor, rolling back privatization, and increasing taxes on gasoline. According to Brian Winter, the editor of *Americas Quarterly* and a longtime analyst of Brazilian politics, "The announcements basically got a C-plus from the markets—nobody too excited, nobody too upset." But Winter was not optimistic that Lula's government would be able to spend its way out of a decade-long slump.

Recovering the Amazon will be harder still. During Bolsonaro's term, as ranchers and miners cleared land, fires consumed an area of rain forest estimated to be the size of Belgium. The region is rife with anti-government sentiment, and Lula and his allies are effectively asking residents not to take advantage of the valuable resources around them. One rancher I spoke with said, "How can you live on top of a treasure chest and not be able to do anything with it?"

Lula's environment minister is Marina Silva, who served for five years during his first tenure but resigned in frustration over his desire to balance conservation with development. Now Lula had called her back, promising a zero-tolerance policy on deforestation. Silva, a rubber tapper's daughter of Black Brazilian descent, is an evangelical Christian, a soft-spoken, long-haired woman in her sixties. At her office in Brasília, she told me that she hoped to expand sustainable agriculture while halting illegal deforestation. She acknowledged that there would still be violations of environmental laws, and that the process would take time. "We won't be able to do this in four years—that would be utopian," she said. "The problem during Bolsonaro was that the transgressors had total impunity. With Lula, at least, the expectation of impunity will end."

Lula and his aides are conscious that the world will judge them less by the details of ordinary governance than by their handling of monumental crises: the collapse of the environment and the near-collapse of democracy. Simone Tebet, his planning minister, told me, "President Lula's big problem is not just economic. He can solve the problem of inflation, the problem of unemployment, reduce social inequality, reduce the percentage of poor people in Brazil. But, if you don't work on political pacification and unity, in four years' time *bolsonarismo* will come back with force." At seventy-seven, Lula had only one term left, and a great deal to do, Tebet reasoned. "He wants to clean the soul of Brazil," she said. "He wants to halt injustice. I have no doubt that he will assemble a team for this. What worries me is whether he will have the strength, ability, discernment to understand that his main role is not just these four years. It is building bridges so that we can, in 2026 and 2030, have democratic governments in Brazil." ♦

LETTER FROM TBILISI

NOVELS OF EMPIRE

Rereading Russian classics in the shadow of the Ukraine war.

BY ELIF BATUMAN

The first and only time I visited Ukraine was in 2019. My book "The Possessed"—a memoir I had published in 2010, about studying Russian literature—had recently been translated into Russian, along with "The Idiot," an autobiographical novel, and I was headed to Russia as a cultural emissary, through an initiative of PEN America and the U.S. Department of State. On the way, I stopped in Kyiv and Lviv: cities I had only ever read about, first in Russian novels, and later in the international news. In 2014, security forces had killed a hundred protesters at Kyiv's Independence Square, and Russian-backed separatists had declared two mini-republics in the Donbas. Nearly everyone I met on my trip—journalists, students, cultural liaisons—seemed to know of someone who had been injured or killed in the protests, or who had joined the volunteer army fighting the separatists in the east.

As the visiting author of two books called "The Possessed" and "The Idiot," I got to hear a certain amount about people's opinions of Dostoyevsky. It was explained to me that nobody in Ukraine wanted to think about Dostoyevsky at the moment, because his novels contained the same expansionist rhetoric as was used in propaganda justifying Russian military aggression. My immediate reaction to this idea was to bracket it off as an understandable by-product of war—as not "objective."

I had years of practice in this kind of distancing. As a student, I had often been asked whether I had Russian relatives and, if not, why I was so interested in "the Russians." Was I perhaps studying the similarities between Peter the Great, who had Westernized Russia, and Atatürk, who had Westernized Turkey, where my relatives were from? Such questions struck me as narrow-minded. Why should I be studying whatever literature happened to have been produced by my ancestors? I was reading Russian literature from a human perspective, not a national one. I had chosen these books precisely for the universal quality expressed in titles like "Fathers and Sons," "Crime and Punishment," and "Dead Souls."

Of course—I saw, in Kyiv—you couldn't expect people in a war *not* to read from a national perspective. I thought back to what I knew of Dostoyevsky's life. As a young man, he had been subjected to a mock execution for holding utopian-socialist views before being exiled to Siberia. In the eighteen-sixties, after his return, he wrote "Crime and Punishment" and "The Idiot," contributing to the development of the psychological novel. I remembered that a later work, "A Writer's Diary," included some dire tirades about how Orthodox Russia was destined to unite the Slavic peoples and re-create Christ's kingdom on earth. Looking back, I could definitely see a connection to some parts of Russian state propaganda.

But wasn't that why we didn't admire Dostoyevsky for his political commentary? The thing he was good at was novels. Anyone in a Dostoyevsky novel who went on an unreadable rant was bound to be contradicted, in a matter of pages, by another ranting character holding the opposite view: a technique known as dialogism, which features prominently both in Russian novels and in my own thinking. In the months following my trip, I often heard the Ukrainian critique of Dostoyevsky replaying in my mind, getting in arguments with past me, and resonating with other reservations I'd had, in recent years, about the role of Russian novels in my life.

These questions took on a sickening salience late last February, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Once I was on the lookout, it wasn't hard to spot Russian literature in the discourse surrounding the war—particularly in Vladimir Putin's repeated invocations of the "Russian World" ("*Russkiy Mir*"), a concept popularized by Kremlin-linked "philosophers" since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Russian World imagines a transnational Russian civilization, one extending even beyond the "triune Russian nation" of "Great Russia" (Russia), "Little Russia" (Ukraine), and "White Russia" (Belarus); it is united by Eastern Orthodoxy, by the Russian language, by the "culture" of Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky—and, when necessary, by air strikes.

In early March, I wasn't altogether surprised to learn that a number of Ukrainian literary groups, including PEN Ukraine, had signed a petition calling for "a total boycott of books from Russia in the world!"—one that entailed not just cutting financial ties with publishers but ceasing to distribute or promote any books by Russian writers. Their rationale was similar to the one I'd encountered in 2019: "Russian propaganda is woven into many books which indeed turns them into weapons and pretexts for the war." The boycott wasn't totally consonant with the PEN charter ("In time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion"). PEN Germany quickly put out a press release to the effect that deranged twenty-first-century politicians shouldn't be conflated with great writers who happened to be from the same country. The header read "The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin."

Pushkin was at the center of the storm. Widely revered as the founder of Russian literature, he serially published "Eugene Onegin," often considered the first great Russian novel, starting in the eighteen-twenties, at a time when much of Russian aristocratic life was conducted in French. Pushkin's own relationship to the Russian state was not untroubled. In 1820, at the age of

Some groups have called for a total boycott of Russian writers. Others say, "The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin."

ILLUSTRATION BY KARLOTTA FREIER

twenty, he was banished from St. Petersburg for writing anti-authoritarian verses (notably "Ode to Liberty," which was later found among the possessions of the Decembrist rebels). In 1826, he was allowed to return to Moscow—with Tsar Nicholas I as his personal censor. He eventually went back to St. Petersburg, where he died, at the age of thirty-seven, after an eminently avoidable duel. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union went on to erect bronze Pushkins all over the world, from Vilnius to Havana to Tashkent. Many monuments were built during the height of Stalin's purges, in 1937: the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's death.

In April, a movement known as Pushkinopad—"Pushkin fall"—began sweeping Ukraine, resulting in the dismantling of dozens of Pushkin statues. A pair of Ukrainian I.T. workers created a chatbot on Telegram (@cancel_pushkin_bot) to identify Russian writers who didn't deserve to have things named after them in Ukraine. It describes Pushkin and Dostoyevsky as Russian chauvinists. (Tolstoy—a vocal pacifist for the last three decades of his life—gets a pass.)

Around that time, I received an invitation to give a talk on Russian literature in Tbilisi, Georgia. It came from a Russian-language study-abroad program that normally took place in St. Petersburg but had relocated, along with its founder, a British educator named Ben Meredith. The invitation gave me pause. There was surely much to be learned at this rich juncture of geospatial and historical currents. But was I really going to inflict myself, in my capacity as an eternal student of Russian literature, on *another* former territory of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union?

Georgia's tangled history with Russia seemed to open out before me like another pathway in an ever-forking maze. In 1783, King Erekle II signed a treaty with Catherine the Great that secured Russian protection of Georgian lands against the Persian Empire (and the Ottoman Empire, and various neighboring tribes and khanates). Russia never fulfilled the treaty and, in 1801, began its annexation of Georgia. Tiflis, as Tbilisi was then known, became a colonial capital, with printing presses, schools, and an opera. It also became the base for Russia's expansion into Chechnya and Dagestan. In response to Russian incursions, many of the North Caucasus highlanders came together to form a Muslim resistance army, led by a series of Dagestani imams, the last of whom, Imam Shamil, surrendered in 1859. During the war, generations of Russian literary youths—among them, Pushkin and Tolstoy—went to the region. They wrote about their experiences, forming what came to be known as the Russian literature of the Caucasus: works I had been hugely excited to learn about in college, because they often included Turkic words. As the nineteenth century progressed, Georgian literary youths began to study in St. Petersburg, read Pushkin, and adopt Russian Romantic rhetoric to describe Georgian national identity.

Georgia was conquered by the Red Army in 1921, and seceded from the U.S.S.R. in 1991. The country annually mourns April 9, 1989, when the Soviet Army quashed a pro-independence demonstration in Tbilisi. Stalin's birthday is still commemorated every December in his hometown of Gori. In 2008, Russia sent troops into Georgia to support the separatist republics South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Memory of the ensuing war has done much to bolster popular Georgian support of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the ruling Georgian Dream Party, founded by the Russian-made billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, hasn't joined the international sanctions against Russia.

After the invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens crossed the Georgian border, for a wide range of reasons, both ideological and pragmatic. Tens of thousands reportedly took up residence in the capital, reviving historic memories and driving up apartment prices. Meanwhile, because so many study-abroad offerings in Russia had been cancelled, enrollment in Meredith's normally tiny program shot up by an order of magnitude, to more than eighty. Contemplating the invitation, I wondered how people in Tbilisi would feel about their city becoming a destination for Russian philological study.

It was "Anna Karenina" that first got me hooked on Russian novels, back in the nineties. As an only child, going back and forth between my divorced parents (both scientists) during the school year, and spending summers with family in Turkey, I grew up surrounded by different, often mutually exclusive opinions and world views. I came to pride myself on a belief in my own objectivity, a special ability to hold in my mind each side's good points, while giving due weight to the criticisms. I fell in love with "Anna Karenina" because of how clearly it showed that no character was wrong—that even the unreasonable-seeming people were doing what appeared right to them, based on their own knowledge and experiences. As a result of everyone's having different knowledge and experiences, they disagreed, and caused each other unhappiness. And yet, all the conflicting voices and perspectives, instead of creating a chaos of non-meaning, somehow worked together to generate *more* meaning.

When I learned that some critics considered "Anna Karenina" to be a continuation of Pushkin's verse novel, "Eugene Onegin," I decided to read that next. It opens with the title character, a world-weary cosmopolitan, inheriting a large country estate. There, he meets Tatiana, a provincial, novel-obsessed teen, who writes him a declaration of love. He rejects her—only to encounter her three years later, in St. Petersburg, where she is now the supremely poised wife of a great general. It was a turn of events that I, a provincial, novel-obsessed teen, found strangely compelling.

At the time of my trip to Ukraine, I was already in the middle of a reckoning with these books—for reasons unrelated, I thought, to geopolitics. It had started in 2017, the year I turned forty, began identifying as queer, published "The Idiot," and went on a book tour amid the swirling disclosures of #MeToo. Like many women, I spent a lot of 2017 rethinking the story of my own romantic and sexual formation. As I tried to map out various assumptions about the universality of heterosexual love and emotional suffering, I came across Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In it, Rich identifies a tendency in Western literature to suggest "that women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men; that even when that attraction is suicidal . . . it is still an organic imperative."

I thought back to "Anna Karenina"

and "Eugene Onegin." How clearly Tolstoy and Pushkin had shown that, by falling in love with men, Anna and Tatiana foreclosed their already direly limited life choices! And yet, that ruinous, self-negating love was made to seem inescapable and glamorous. Anna dies, but looking fantastic, and thinking insightful thoughts up to the moment of her death. Tatiana's love letter to Eugene Onegin causes nothing but heartache—but what a great letter! Had such novels encouraged me to view women's suffering over men as an irreducible, even desirable part of the human experience—as something to be impartially appreciated, rather than challenged?

THE STAGES of MAN
SCREAMING BABY
BRATTY KID
OBNOXIOUS TEEN
OVERCONFIDENT HIPSTER
OBLIVIOUS DUDE
SMUG RETIREE
GEEZER
L FINCK

In Ukraine, in 2019, confronting an unfamiliar critique of Dostoyevsky, I had instinctively reverted to the idea that novels should be read objectively. But what constituted an objective attitude to Dostoyevsky? "The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin": was *that* objective? Such thinking had long formed a part of my own mental furniture. Putin had come into power the year I started my Ph.D. in comparative (mostly Russian) literature, which thus coincided roughly with the beginning of the Second Chechen War. That war was still going on eight years later, when I finally filed my dissertation. I don't remember making any clear connection between my studies and the war. Certainly, it would have seemed facile to me to use Russian literature to explain Putin's actions. What was next, mining James Fenimore Cooper for insights into Donald Rumsfeld? (But what *would* "The Last of the Mohicans" look like, read from Baghdad in 2003?)

The idea that great novels disclose universal human truths, or contain a purely literary meaning that transcends national politics, wasn't evenly distributed across the world. I had seen no signs of it in Kyiv. After the 2022 invasion, it was voiced both by Western groups, like PEN Germany, and in Russian outlets. "Writers don't want war, they don't want to get involved in politics," reads a pro-invasion open letter signed, last February, by hundreds of self-identified "writers," that was published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, a newspaper with Pushkin's portrait on the masthead.

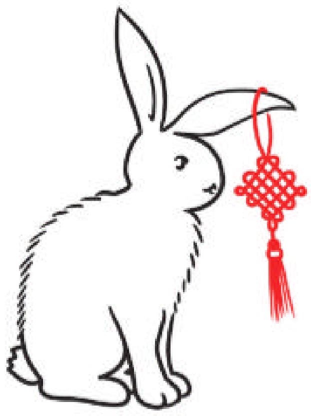
It made me think: if the books I loved so objectively were actually vehicles of patriarchal ideology, why wouldn't the ideology of expansionism be in there, too? Was that something I could see better from Tbilisi?

It was in Tiflis, I reflected, that the twenty-three-year-old Tolstoy, having expended much of his youth on gambling and what is sometimes called "women," started writing his first novel. He had gone there to enlist in the military, and had eventually served in present-day Chechnya and in Crimea. In one of his last works, "Hadji Murat," Tolstoy returns to the Tiflis of 1851. There, he had crossed paths with the real Hadji Murat, a rebel commander who fell out with Imam Shamil and offered his services to Russia, but ended up getting decapitated. His head was sent to the Kunstkamera museum, in St. Petersburg. (Hadji Murat's descendants and Dagestani politicians have long been petitioning for its return.) In the novel, Tolstoy likens Hadji Murat's severed head to a beautiful Tartar thistle he uprooted one day from a ditch.

My college fascination with the Russian literature of the Caucasus hadn't lasted—the books I liked best seemed to be the ones set in the center, not the peripheries—but I had once written a term paper comparing Hadji Murat's head at the end of "Hadji Murat" with Anna Karenina's head near the end of "Anna Karenina." When Anna jumps in front of a train, having grasped, in the course of a revelatory stream-of-consciousness carriage ride, the futility of human relations and of her love for Vronsky, her body is mutilated—but "the intact head with its heavy plaits and hair curling at the temples" continues to exercise its magnetism, "the lovely face with its half-open red lips" wearing a terrible expression. In both cases, the human head, detached from its customary function and milieu, is represented as a static image for contemplation—rather than as a symbol of a potentially avoidable human-rights incident.

Now I dug up my old copy of "Hadji Murat" and reread the pages set at a newly opened theatre in Tiflis, where Hadji Murat stoically endures the first act of an Italian opera. The description of him limping into the theatre in his turban recalls the scene in which Anna Karenina, wearing a rich lace headdress, defies social norms by appearing at the opera in St. Petersburg. Will the Russian viceroy protect Hadji Murat's family? Will Karenin grant Anna a divorce? Considered side by side, the operas of Tiflis and St. Petersburg seemed to become more than the sum of their parts—as when two photographs, taken from different angles and viewed stereoscopically, cause a three-dimensional image to spring from the page. The hidden mechanisms of patriarchy and expansionism suddenly came into focus as two facets of the same huge apparatus. What other aspects of the "universal" Russian novel might be visible from a trip to the former imperial peripheries?

My flight from Istanbul was overbooked and delayed. I headed straight from the airport to the program orientation in a courtyard in Old Tbilisi, arriving just in time to hear an audience of thirty-odd, mostly British university students receiving instruction in how to practice their Russian without triggering the local population. A list of Russian-friendly bars was distributed. (There had been stories of Russian speakers being ejected from bars.) I was introduced to the students as a guest lecturer. The lectures, I learned, would be followed by something called "*(ref)*lectures."



"It's terrible! It's so bad!" Meredith said gleefully of the name, which he had made up himself. He had also, despite objections by the lecture coördinator, Katya Korableva, called the program "We Must Believe in Spring." When I asked Korableva about the name, she shook her head and looked down, eventually saying that she thought it was too optimistic. (I would later encounter a similarly visceral-seeming lack of optimism in other antiwar Russians I met. Once, in a rustic courtyard in Telavi, I heard an expatriate podcaster from Moscow mutter, "I can't even," as he turned his back on a picturesque wooden window shutter: the boards happened to form a letter "Z," a symbol of Putin's war.)

At breakfast the next morning, I felt nervous about speaking Russian, which limited my ability to exchange niceties with some people making pancakes in the kitchen. I stress-ate several pancakes, while trying to figure out what to prioritize: rereading Russian novels, reading Georgian and Ukrainian novels, meeting Georgian people, meeting Russian people, visiting historic sites? What was the right way to untangle the relationship between Russian imperialism—arguably a forerunner of both Soviet and post-Soviet expansionism—and the novels I'd loved growing up?

I was staying at the Writers' House of Georgia, an Art Nouveau mansion said to be haunted by the ghost of the poet Paolo Iashvili, a member of the Georgian Blue Horns symbolist group, who had shot himself there in 1937. Lavrentiy Beria—who orchestrated Stalin's purges in Georgia—had been making writers testify against one another. Tbilisi's Pushkin monument was a short walk away, and I decided to pay it a visit.

I'm the kind of person who can get lost anywhere, so I spent a long time wandering around the Writers' House, trying to find the exit. In one hall, I came upon a wooden door with a plate that read "Museum of Repressed Writers." I tried the door handle. It was locked.

Once I had escaped from the building, I turned right, onto a street named after Mikhail Lermontov. Lermontov had been exiled to the environs of Tiflis as a military officer in 1837, for writing a poem that implicated court slanderers in Pushkin's duel-related death. He went on to serve in the Caucasus, which furnished the materials for his ironically titled novel "A Hero of Our Time." (The opening line is "I was travelling post from Tiflis.") Pushkin, too, had first come to the region as a political exile, in 1820. Inspired by his surroundings, he wrote "Prisoner of the Caucasus," a narrative poem in which a Circassian girl falls in love with a Russian prisoner of war, who is too brooding and Byronic to return her feelings—until she risks her life to set him free, at which point he implores her to go with him to Russia. No longer capable of happiness, she drowns herself instead. It's considered the first major work of the Russian literature of the Caucasus, and I had reread it in preparation for my trip.

In the epilogue, Pushkin implies a connection between the Circassian girl's fate and that of the North Caucasian peoples. The most ominous line—"Submit, Caucasus, Ermolov is coming!"—had recently been quoted to me by the Ukrainian Telegram bot. General Alexei Ermolov, a Russian commander whose brutal tactics contributed to the elimination of some nine-tenths of the Upper Circassian population, once declared, "I desire that the terror of my name shall guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses"—an ambition in which he was arguably assisted by Pushkin.

I turned onto Pushkin Street, which led to Pushkin Park, and there was Pushkin, or at least his bust, perched on a pink marble plinth. I felt somehow relieved to see him. Then I felt ashamed of feeling relieved. I wondered what Pushkin had felt—whether shame had entered into it—after getting banished by a tsar, at twenty, for a poem he had written as a teen-ager. "Returning to St. Petersburg from his exile, Pushkin stopped criticizing the Russian throne, and started to write great-power odes, glorifying imperial aggressive acts of tsarism against neighboring peoples": that's the chronologically reductive, but not totally inaccurate, interpretation offered by the Ukrainian chatbot. For the rest of his life, the Pushkin who championed individual freedom was always alternating with the Pushkin who celebrated the Empire.

Take the preface of Pushkin's poem "The Bronze Horseman" (1837), which shows Peter the Great contemplating the swamp, dotted by the blackened hovels of "miserable Finns," where he plans to found St. Petersburg. (It was by establishing a westward-facing capital with access to the Baltic Sea in 1703, as well as by radically Westernizing military and civic institutions, that Peter transformed Russia into a major European power.) "From here we shall threaten the Swede," Peter reflects. It wasn't like there was nothing there that could remind you of Putin. At the same time, "The Bronze Horseman"—a nightmarish fantasia in which the most famous statue in St. Petersburg, an equestrian Peter, leaps off its pedestal and terrorizes a clerk to death—is surely, among other things, a testament to Pushkin's ambivalence toward monuments. In its way, it's a poem about a monument that dismantles *itself*. What would Pushkin have made of the Pushkinopad movement in Ukraine? It might depend on which Pushkin you asked.

I headed back toward the Writers' House on a street named after another Blue Horns poet, Galaktion Tabidze. Having lost both his wife and a cousin in the purges, Tabidze had eventually jumped to his death from the window of a psychiatric hospital. It occurred to me to wonder whether I was already inside the Museum of Repressed Writers. Maybe that locked door hadn't been keeping us out but locking us all in.

One place I had really wanted to see in Tbilisi was the Tiflis Imperial Theatre, opened in 1851 to promote Russian culture and to distract people's attention from the North Caucasus war. The young Tolstoy had attended the Italian opera there, and I felt certain it was the same theatre that he imagined Hadji Murat visiting. Unfortunately, the building turned out to have burned down in 1874. Instead, I stopped by its original site, in Freedom Square, where Pushkin Street meets Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue. Standing in the busy square, gazing from the City Assembly building, constructed in the nineteenth-century Moorish Revival style, to a Courtyard by Marriott Hotel, renovated in the early-two-thousands Courtyard by Marriott style, I felt the words "center" and "periphery" slowly losing their meaning. In Tolstoy's career, was Tbilisi peripheral, or was it central? Tolstoy's first novel, "Childhood," was written in Tiflis but set in Russia. Fifty years later, "Hadji Murat" was written in Russia, but set partly in Tiflis.

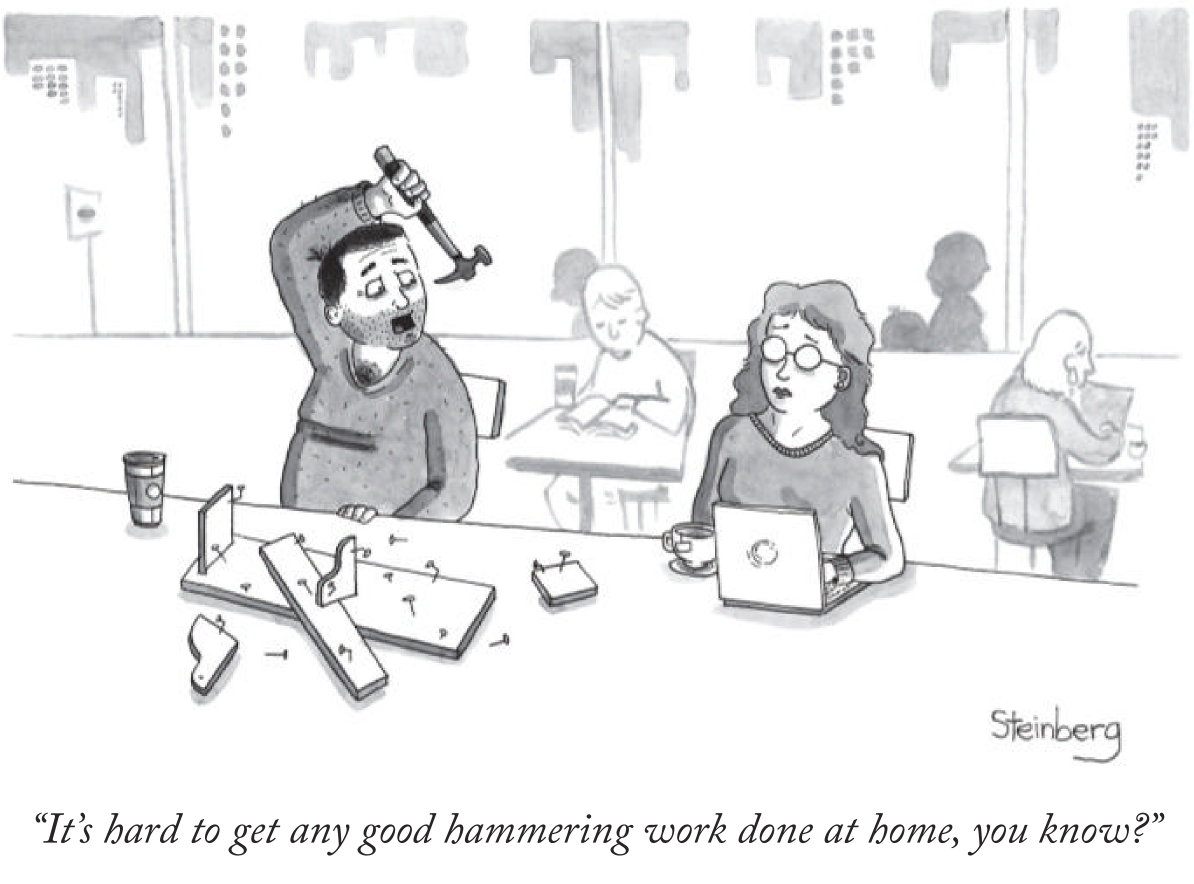
Historical phenomena—revolution, modernity—are often said to start at a center, and then to spread to the peripheries. But that hierarchy or chronology—center first, periphery second—can be misleading. Technically, capitalism wasn't born in a self-sufficient Western Europe and then transmitted to the rest of the world. It was, from the beginning, enabled by the wealth streaming into Western Europe from non-European colonies. The peripheries were always already playing a central role.

I thought of Edward Said's "Culture and Imperialism" (1993)—a classic text that I read for the first time only after my Ukraine trip—which makes a similar case about novels. As Said points out, novels became a dominant literary form in eighteenth-century Britain and France, precisely when Britain was becoming the biggest empire in world history and France was a rival. Novels and empires grew symbiotically, defining and sustaining each other. "Robinson Crusoe," one of the first British novels, is about an English castaway who learns to exploit the natural and human resources of a non-European island. In an influential reading of "Mansfield Park," Said zooms in on a few references to a second, Antiguan property—implicitly, a sugar plantation—belonging to Mansfield's proprietor. The point isn't just that life in the English countryside is underwritten by slave labor, but that the novel's plot itself mirrors the colonial enterprise. Fanny Price, an outsider at Mansfield, undergoes a series of harrowing social trials, and marries the baronet's son. A rational subject comes to a scary new place—one already inhabited by other, unreasonable people—and becomes its rightful occupant. What does a story like that tell you about how the world works?

In college, I had studied Said's earlier and more famous book, "Orientalism," which is often assigned alongside the Russian literature of the Caucasus. (It's about how Western descriptions of the East, whether scientific or artistic, end up reinforcing modes of Western domination.) But I had never read "Culture and Imperialism," or considered the role of imperialism in novels like "Anna Karenina." Post-colonial criticism, which Said helped pioneer, originally focussed on the legacy of British and French colonialism, meaning that places like Russia, Turkey, and the former Soviet Union tended to get left out. Said himself omitted Russia from his book, claiming that the subject was too big, and that, because the Russian Empire grew contiguously, and not by overseas conquest, imaginative projections didn't play the same role as they did in Britain or in France. (Russian literature curricula are already changing, in the wake of the Ukraine war. The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, a leading professional organization, has dedicated its 2023 conference to the theme of decolonization.)

In Tbilisi, it seemed clear that the Russian Empire had required vast resources of imagination to build and to sustain—and that my favorite novels might have played a role. In "Eugene Onegin," I kept coming back to Tatiana's husband, a war hero "maimed in battle." Though mentioned only briefly, he's the catalyst for Tatiana's transformation—the reversal that makes Onegin fall in love with her. We never do learn whom the general himself may have maimed. The maiming that we do see: Tatiana gazing emotionlessly at Onegin; Onegin corpselike and grovelling, as the general's spurs clink in the hallway. Tatiana reminded me now of the Circassian girl in "Prisoner of the Caucasus," who also loves in vain, until she aligns herself in a self-annihilating way with the interests of the Russian Empire. And wasn't that Pushkin's arc, too? Tatiana wrote a rash declaration to Onegin; Pushkin wrote a rash ode to freedom. Tatiana became the social queen of St. Petersburg, Pushkin its foremost poet.

As for "Anna Karenina," it really does start where Onegin ends: with a flawlessly dressed heroine married to an influential imperialist. The tension between



"It's hard to get any good hammering work done at home, you know?"

"How to accumulate vast sums of money is the best trick you ever taught me."

center and periphery is woven into the plot. The character of Karenin, a statesman involved in the resettlement of the "subject races," turns out to be partly based on Pyotr Valuev, the Minister of the Interior from 1861 to 1868. Valuev oversaw the Russian appropriation of Bashkir lands around the Ural Mountains—and also issued a notorious decree restricting the publication of Ukrainian-language educational and religious texts throughout the Empire. (It reads, in part, "A separate Little Russian language never existed, does not exist, and shall not exist.")

Unlike Tatiana, Anna doesn't remain faithful to her empire-building husband. She leaves Karenin for Vronsky, who turns down a prestigious military post in Tashkent in order to travel with her to Italy. But the Imperial Army gets Vronsky back in the end. That final image of Anna's lifeless head is actually a flashback Vronsky has, on his way to join a Pan-Slavic volunteer detachment fighting the Ottomans in Serbia. With Anna dead, and the love plot over, his only desire is to end his own life, and to kill as many Turks as possible in the process. To quote a recent think piece titled "Decolonizing the Mysterious Soul of the Great Russian Novel," by Liubov Terekhova—a Ukrainian critic who was reassessing "Anna Karenina" from the United Arab Emirates, as Russia bombed her home city, Kyiv—"Russia is always waging a war where a man can flee in search of death."

Literature, in short, looks different depending on where you read it: a subject I found myself discussing one afternoon over lunch, in a garden overlooking Tbilisi, with Anna Kats, a Georgian-born, Russian-speaking scholar of socialist architecture, who immigrated to Los Angeles as a child. We talked about the essay "Can the Post-Soviet Think?," by Madina Tlostanova, an Uzbek-Circassian proponent of "decoloniality," a theory that originated in Latin America around the turn of the millennium. A key tenet is that "thinking" is never placeless or disembodied. The first principle of thought isn't, as Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am," but "I am where I think."

I remembered the first time I read Pushkin's travelogue "Journey to Arzrum," the summer I turned twenty—during my own initial foray into travel writing, for a student guidebook. I had requested an assignment in Russia, but my Russian wasn't good enough, so I was sent to Turkey. To improve my Russian, I was reading Pushkin on night buses, feeling excited every time I saw Erzurum (Pushkin's Arzrum) on the schedule board at intercity stations.

Turkey hadn't been Pushkin's first-choice destination, either—he had wanted to go to Paris. Denied official permission, he resolved to leave the country the only way he could think of—by accompanying the military in the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29. The tone of the resulting travelogue fluctuates unsettlingly between chatty verbiage and dispassionate horror. "The Circassians hate us," Pushkin writes at one point. "We have forced them out of their open grazing lands; their auls"—villages—"have been devastated, whole tribes have been wiped out." Nine years after his first visit to the Caucasus, Pushkin seems to have gained some clarity on the Circassians' plight. (In 2011, the Georgian parliament voted to characterize Russia's actions there as a genocide.) Still, in the next sentence, he goes on to observe, implausibly, that Circassian babies wield sabres before they can talk. Later in his account, Pushkin describes a lunch with troops during which they see, on a facing mountainside, the Ottoman Army retreating from Russian Cossack reinforcements—leaving behind a "decapitated and truncated" Cossack corpse. Pushkin quickly segues to the congeniality of camp life: "At dinner we washed down Asiatic shashlik with English beer and champagne chilled in the snows of Taurida."

What can we afford to see, as writers and as readers? Could Pushkin afford to see that he benefitted from the "resettlement" of the Circassians? How clearly could he see it? For how long at a time?

After lunch, Kats and I took a funicular to the top of Mt. Mtatsminda, where she maintained that Tbilisi's best custard-filled doughnuts were to be found. Rising above the treetops, thinking back on my own national and global privileges, the extent of which have grown clearer to me with the passing years, I did not, I decided, find it difficult to understand Pushkin's simultaneous ability and inability to perceive the truth.

The relationship between literary merit and military power is not a delightful subject for contemplation. I prefer to think that I would have loved Pushkin even if Peter and Catherine the Great *hadn't* waged extensive foreign and internal wars, dragging Russia into the European balance of power. But would Pushkin's work still have been translated into English and stocked in the Barnes & Noble on Route 22 in northern New Jersey—in the world superpower to which my parents came in the seventies, in pursuit of the best scientific equipment? Even if it had been translated, and I had read it, I might not have recognized it as good. Would it have *been* good?

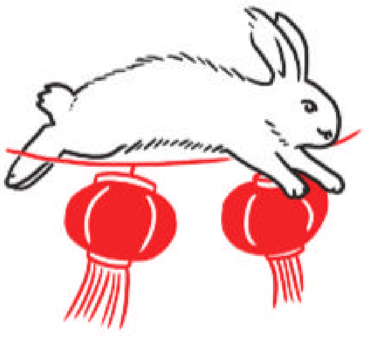
In Tbilisi, I remembered a line from Oksana Zabuzhko's classic 1996 novel, "Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex," which I read on my 2019 trip to Kyiv. "Even if you did, by some miracle, produce something in this language 'knocking out Goethe's *Faust*,'" Zabuzhko writes, of Ukrainian, "it would only lie around the libraries unread." Her narrator, an unnamed Ukrainian-language poet visiting Harvard, suffers countless indignities. She's broke, and her work is rarely translated. But she refuses to write in English or in Russian. A self-identified "nationalist-masochist," she remains faithful to her forebears: poets who "hurled themselves like firelogs into the dying embers of the Ukrainian with nothing to fucking show for it but mangled destinies and unread books."

Were those books unread because they weren't as good as Pushkin's—or was it perhaps the other way round? If a book isn't read, and doesn't influence other books, will it hold less meaning and resonance for future readers? Conversely, can a "good" book be written without robust literary institutions? "Eugene Onegin" is clearly a product of Pushkin's constant dialogue with the editors, friends, rivals, critics, and readers whose words surrounded him, even in exile. Nikolai Gogol, born in 1809 in Ukraine with Pushkin-scale talents, became a famous writer only after moving to St. Petersburg.

Gogol, now a central figure in the post-2022 discourse about Russian literature, first found critical success in the capital by writing, in Russian, on Ukrainian themes. But the same critics who praised him also urged him to write about more universal—i.e., more Russian—subjects. Gogol duly produced the Petersburg Tales and Part 1 of "Dead Souls." A celebrated literary hostess once asked Gogol whether, in his soul, he was truly Russian or Ukrainian. In response, he demanded, "Tell me, am I a saint; can I really see all my loathsome faults?" and launched into a tirade about his faults, and also other people's faults. He eventually suffered a spiritual breakdown, came to believe that his literary works were sinful, burned part of his manuscripts (possibly including Part 2 of "Dead Souls"), stopped eating, and died in great pain at forty-two.

The Kremlin now uses Gogol's work as evidence that Ukraine and Russia share a single culture. (An essay about Gogol's Russianness appears on the Web site of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which Putin started in 2007.) According to a 2021 article by Putin, Gogol's books "are written in Russian, bristling with Malorussian"—Little Russian—"folk sayings and motifs. How can this heritage be divided between Russia and Ukraine?"

In Tbilisi, the Gogol story I kept coming back to was "The Nose": the one where Major Kovalyov, a mid-level civil servant, wakes up one morning with no nose. Fearing for his job and his marriage prospects, he hits the streets of St. Petersburg, searching for his missing proboscis. A carriage pulls up nearby. A personage emerges, wearing a uniform and plumed hat that denote a higher rank than Kovalyov's. It is Kovalyov's nose. "Don't you know where you belong?" Kovalyov demands. "Don't you realize you are *my own nose!*"



The nose coldly replies, "My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right."

Read enough Putin speeches and Kovalyov's attitude toward his nose starts to sound familiar. How dare a mere appendage masquerade as an independent entity? What cruelty, to separate the Little Russian nose from the Great Russian face! In "The Nose," as in so much of the Russian literature that I had been revisiting, the interests of empire prevail. The police apprehend Kovalyov's runaway organ "just as it was boarding the stagecoach bound for Riga." Tellingly, the nose had been headed west.

The morning of my lecture, I went for a walk on Rustaveli Avenue. The broad tree-lined sidewalks were flanked with used booksellers purveying, alongside Georgian books I couldn't read, lone volumes of Tolstoy and Turgenev. At one stall, a series of Soviet-era classroom maps—one of them showing the changing eighteenth-century borders of the Russian and Ottoman Empires—were held in place by a Latvian cookbook and a Dostoyevsky omnibus.

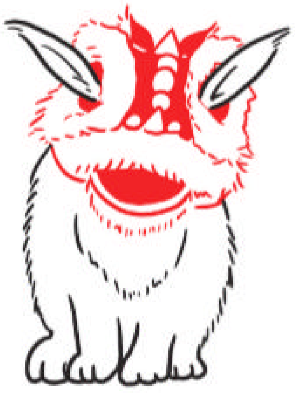
Dostoyevsky: we meet at last. I opened it to "Crime and Punishment," the story of Raskolnikov, a poor student, who decides to murder an old pawnbroker to fund his education. Turning the yellowed pages, I noticed multiple mentions of Napoleon. I thought back on Raskolnikov's theory about how "extraordinary" individuals have the right to kill others for "the fulfillment of an idea." If Napoleon, who murdered thousands of Egyptian people and stole their archeological treasures, is lauded as the founder of Egyptology, why *shouldn't* a student be able to kill one person to advance his studies? The logic of Raskolnikov's crime, I realized, was the logic of imperialism.

"Putin's offensive on February 24 owed much to Dostoevskyism," Oksana Zabuzhko wrote in an essay last April, after the massacre in Bucha. She called the invasion "an explosion of pure, distilled evil and long-suppressed hatred and envy," adding, " 'Why should you live better than us?' Russian soldiers have been saying to Ukrainians." It was easy to see that message in "Crime and Punishment." Why should "some ridiculous old hag" have money, when Raskolnikov is poor?

Dostoyevsky didn't, of course, endorse Raskolnikov's views. (The clue is in the title: the story ends in a Siberian prison.) Still, he found his ideas interesting enough to be the subject of a book. Should we still read that book? In "Culture and Imperialism," Edward Said raises a similar question about Jane Austen. He concludes that to "jettison" "Mansfield Park" is to miss an opportunity to see literature as a dynamic network, rather than as the isolated experiences of victims and perpetrators—but that the solution isn't to keep consuming Austen's novels in a geopolitical vacuum. Instead, we need to find new, "contrapuntal" ways of reading. That means seeing "Mansfield Park" as a book with two geographies: one, England, richly elaborated; the other, Antigua, strenuously resisted—yet revealed, all the same.

Contrapuntal, or stereoscopic, reading felt like an exciting approach to the Russian canon, in which categories like victim and perpetrator—or center and periphery—are particularly fluid. Madina Tlostanova, the decolonial critic, has described Imperial Russia, along with the Ottoman sultanate, as a special kind of "secondary" empire, one that formed on the margins of Europe, and that compensated for its resulting inferiority complex by "modernizing" its own subject peoples. Peter the Great's Westernization of Russia can be seen as an unacknowledged trauma. In the words of the scholar Boris Groys, this "cruel inoculation" protected Russia against "real colonization by a West that surpassed it both technically and militarily."

A contrapuntal approach would mean thinking about Russian classics alongside works by Zabuzhko and Tlostanova—and Dato Turashvili, Nana Ekvtimishvili, Nino Haratischwili, Taras Shevchenko, Andrey Kurkov, Yevgenia Belorusets, and Serhiy Zhadan, to name a handful of the important Georgian and Ukrainian writers whose works exist in English. It would mean not bracketing off novelists' political views, as I initially tried to do with Dostoyevsky. One editorial in *The Spectator*, responding to the proposed suspension of a Dostoyevsky lecture series in Milan, called it ironic to "censure" a writer who had himself been "sent to a Siberian labour camp for reading banned books that attacked the Tsarist regime." As it turns out, being a victim of imperial repression doesn't make you incapable of perpetuating repressive ideas. One of Dostoyevsky's fellow-prisoners in Siberia, a Polish nationalist, wrote in his memoirs about Dostoyevsky's insistence that Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland "had forever been the property of Russia," and would, without Russia, be mired in "dark illiteracy, barbarism, and abject poverty."



In 1880, near the end of his life, Dostoyevsky gave a famous speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin monument in what is now Moscow's Pushkin Square, extolling Pushkin as the most Russian *and* the most universal of writers. He linked Pushkin's achievements to Peter's reforms, through which Russia didn't just adopt "European clothes, customs, inventions and science" but actually incorporated into its soul "the genius of foreign nations." Russia, like Pushkin, knew how to transcend national limitations, and was on a course to "reconcile the contradictions of Europe," thereby fulfilling the word of Christ. The speech was received with hysteria, weeping, screaming, and shouts of "You have solved it!," referring to the eternal mystery of Pushkin. Dostoyevsky's "Pushkin speech" is quoted on the Russkiy Mir Foundation's Web site.

The point of drawing a connection between Dostoyevsky and Putin isn't to "censure" Dostoyevsky but to understand the mechanics of trauma and repression. Among the writer's formative memories was an incident he observed at age fifteen, at a post station on the road to St. Petersburg. Before his eyes, a uniformed courier rushed out of the station, jumped into a fresh troika, and immediately started punching the neck of the driver—who, in turn, frantically whipped the horses. The troika took off at breakneck speed. Dostoyevsky imagined the driver going back to his village that night and beating his wife.

Dostoyevsky eventually adapted this memory into Raskolnikov's nightmare in "Crime and Punishment." In it, Raskolnikov dreams that he is a child and has to watch a peasant beat a horse to death. On waking, he clearly connects the dream to his own impending plan to kill someone with an axe. He then gets out of bed and kills someone with an axe. In other words, being a middle link in a long chain of violence—even *knowing* you're a middle link in a long chain of violence—doesn't magically rapture you out of the chain. In his own life, Dostoyevsky didn't always apply this insight—but, like all good novelists, he enabled his future readers to see further than he could at the time.

My talk about how we don't need to stop reading Russian literature was received warmly by the audience of assembled Russian majors and educators. One student, bringing up Pushkinopad, asked whether my ideal vision of the world was one in which the Pushkin monuments were toppled. I wondered aloud whether, in an ideal world, we might recognize literary achievement in some way other than by building giant bronze men who tower above us.

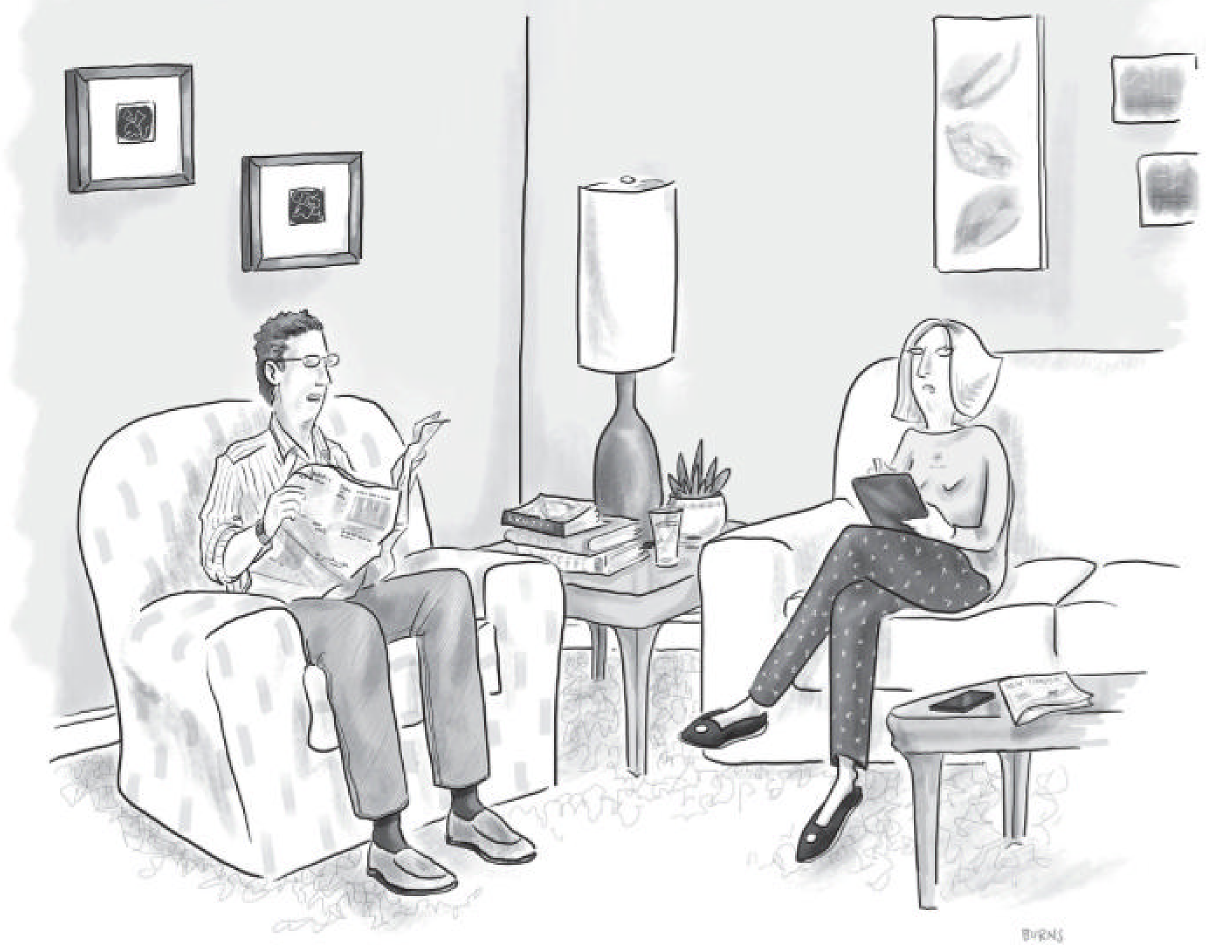
Later that evening, I heard that one live-stream viewer of the lecture had written in, protesting the decision to broadcast a talk about Russian literature. As I walked back to the Writers' House, past a bar with a chalkboard that said "FREE WINE on the occasion of PUTIN'S DEATH," I contemplated the vast difference between an ideal vision of the world and the world we live in. Feeling a wave of pessimism, I thought back to the essay in which Zabuzhko, quoting Tolstoy's line "There are no guilty people in the world," characterizes Russian literature as a two-hundred-year festival of misplaced sympathy for criminals, rather than for their victims, enabling crimes—including war crimes—to continue.

Something in her argument resonated with me. Wasn't there a way of celebrating the ability to feel sorry, the ability to "see all sides," to "objectively" take in the whole situation, that ended with seeing painful outcomes as complicated, interesting, and unchangeable? It was as if "good" novels had to make human affairs seem insoluble and ambiguous. If a problem in a novel looked too clear-cut—if the culprit was too obvious—we called it bad art. It was a subject I'd been thinking over for a while, questioning my own decision to write novels. There are signs that Tolstoy had similar worries. After publishing "Anna Karenina," he underwent a "spiritual crisis" or "conversion," decided his own novels were immoral, and turned to religious writing. But, eventually, he went back to novels—including "Hadji Murat."

"Hadji Murat," which was published posthumously, is considered unique in Tolstoy's work, and in the nineteenth-century Russian canon, for how thoroughly it enters the perspective of the imperial subject. In consecutive chapters, Tolstoy portrays the destruction of a Chechen village, first from the point of view of a young Russian officer—he can't believe his luck at being, not in a smoke-filled room in St. Petersburg, but "in this glorious region among these brave Caucasians"—and then from the perspective of the villagers, whose lives have been "so lightly and senselessly destroyed." The juxtaposition recalls Pushkin's "Journey to Arzrum": the gutted village, the iced champagne. But Tolstoy, whose life was many decades longer than Pushkin's, exposes the terrible calculus facing the villagers, who must abandon their own values and join either the Russian Empire or Imam Shamil's resistance. The imam's brutality mirrors Tsar Nicholas's. As in the image of Dostoyevsky's troika, it's easy to see the chain of violence—and maybe to envision its disruption.

Multiplicity is built into the text: ten versions exist, none conclusive. Tolstoy kept the draft at hand until his death, in 1910. In an 1898 diary entry, Tolstoy mentions a certain "English toy"—it sounds stereoscopic—that "shows under a glass now one thing, now another." Hadji Murat, he writes, must be represented in this fashion: as "a husband, a fanatic, etc." It occurred to me to think of that "English toy" as the novel itself—a technology inherited by Tolstoy from Austen and Defoe, one that could reveal different truths from different points in space and time, perhaps even destabilizing the structures it once bolstered.

Most of "Hadji Murat" takes place outside of Russia, in the North Caucasus and Georgia, places where Russia isn't unilaterally right. It's where Tolstoy, having escaped the smoke-filled rooms of St. Petersburg, first became a writer. Looking at "Hadji Murat" from Tbilisi, I found its stereoscopic quality extending to "Anna Karenina," which also became less fixed, more provisional, in my mind—almost as if Anna's fate, like the meaning of the novel itself, could, and would, keep changing.



"Isn't us talking about how I would never take a ballroom-dancing class an activity we're doing together?"

• •

One evening in Tbilisi, at a restaurant around the corner from where Tolstoy had lived, I met the filmmaker Salomé Jashi. I had been captivated by her 2021 film, "Taming the Garden," about a project orchestrated by Georgia's former Prime Minister, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, to uproot hundreds of trees from across the country, for relocation at a privately funded "dendrological park" on the Black Sea.

Jashi doesn't appear in the film, which has no narration. Instead, the camera silently follows the workers who carry out the extraction with giant machines. Locals, having exchanged their rights to the trees for unheard-of sums, contemplate the ravaged earth, the stumps and severed limbs of other trees that had to be cut down to make way for the trucks. They weep, cross themselves, laugh, shoot cell-phone videos. Some seem to be auditioning different emotions, to see which one fits.

Jashi told me that, as a child, during the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia—a partially recognized Russian-backed state, which Georgia views as a historic part of its territory—she used to write patriotic poems, and dreamed of devoting her life to her country. She speaks Russian, but as a teen-ager she stopped reading Russian books. To this day, she has never read a novel by Dostoyevsky; not, she told me, on principle, but because she didn't want to read books in Russian, and why read Dostoyevsky in translation?

As I topped off our wine—we were splitting a bottle—I found myself recalling the unforgettable shots in Jashi's film of massive trees in transit. One bounces sedately down a country road on the back of a flatbed truck; another glides along the Black Sea on a barge. The image of the sailing tree, its leaves ruffled by the breeze, was almost too outlandish to process, more like a metaphor than like anything actually existing in the world. In it, I seemed to see the spectral presence of Ivanishvili, whom many suspect of steering the country behind the scenes. I saw Robinson Crusoe's island, unmoored and floating toward the horizon. I saw the thistle Tolstoy yanked out of the earth, now bigger than he was. And I saw the great Russian novels themselves, their roots newly visible, their branches stretching to the sky. ♦

Different People
–
Clare Sestanovich

ILLUSTRATION BY JILLIAN TAMAKI

When Gilly was young, she lied to her diary. It was not a toy diary. She had dutifully filled several of those already, notebooks in girlish colors, with ostentatious locks and miniature keys. This new diary had a dull-brown cover and no means of protecting itself. It was an object she could imagine becoming an artifact. She wrote in smooth black ink that glittered mysteriously until it dried, and she chose her words carefully, the longer the better. There were some words—squeezed to fit in the narrow space between lines, much narrower than she was used to—that she wasn't sure how to pronounce. She wrote for an audience. She was twelve years old.

The problem was that her life was uneventful. She had a mother and a father and a back yard, and although she didn't have a dog or a cat, she had been permitted to have a bird. It had a pale-blue breast—she said *breast* without embarrassment, or tried to, because it was childish not to—and black-and-white feathers that looked like an elegant houndstooth coat. These colors were much better than the bright green and raucous yellow of other parakeets, but there still wasn't much to write about a bird. In a hundred years, when Gilly was dead, or so old that her skin had turned to paper and all her words to pure, precious truth, no one would want to read about cleaning out the birdcage, no matter how much she had thought about it. Dread consumed her for days in advance of the task; disgust overpowered her as she swept the small, hard pellets into the trash. The bird, released from its cage, sometimes sat on Gilly's head, its pale, bony feet pressing into her scalp.

So she made stuff up. Her inventions were subtle and artful. She didn't become an orphan or contract an unexplained illness. She didn't escape the tree-lined street where nothing ever happened. In fact, Gilly mostly didn't lie about herself at all. That was harder than it looked. But it was easy, she discovered, to lie about her parents, because, when she really thought about it, she realized that she barely knew them. Of all the injustices of being a child, this might have been the greatest: they had known her for her entire life—they knew things about her that she, limited by a small and porous memory, never would—but Gilly had witnessed only a fraction of theirs.

In writing, she referred to her parents as Peter and Lisa. On the first page of her diary, she reported that late at night, when she was supposed to be asleep, she could hear them fighting downstairs. In the next entry, she wrote that the fighting, which had begun as whispering, had escalated: now they were yelling.

None of it was true. All Gilly could hear from upstairs was the sound of the piano, which Peter played every night. Popular, easy songs—stuff he remembered from his childhood or had picked up listening to the radio. Nothing classic or classical. He wasn't very good—he was a doctor, not a pianist—but he said that music was a universal language; you didn't have to get it just right.

Sometimes he'd sing, too. Lisa never sang, but every now and then Gilly could make out her voice, cutting through the music, probably to ask a difficult, profound question (her questions were always difficult and profound) or to read something aloud from the book in her lap.

Gilly's lies were unsettling to think about, but as soon as she started writing they were exciting. She described what it was like to lie in bed, swallowed up by the dark, bombarded by the sounds of conflict, and later, when she actually was lying in bed, the real dark seemed different, because it contained the fake dark, too. It seemed deeper, stranger.

But what would they fight *about*? Whatever she made up had to be believable. There was a difference between invention—a functional fantasy, pieced together from reality's spare parts—and pure fiction, silly stories that faded as soon as they were finished, like even the most pleasurable dreams. So Gilly studied her parents intently. Once she started paying attention, it became clear that they avoided disagreement as carefully as she sought it out. They took turns cooking and cleaning and even mowing the lawn, something Gilly had only ever seen men do. They made polite, open-ended inquiries: *How was your day*? When Peter told jokes and Lisa didn't laugh, she apologized. *Sorry*, she'd say, *I don't get it*.

Peter was a doctor who took care of very sick kids. This sounded like a serious job, but Lisa was the truly serious one. That was what Gilly liked best about her: she understood the proper weight of things. Lisa was a philosopher. There were a lot of dads who were doctors, but Gilly had never met another mom who was a philosopher. Years ago, when Gilly had asked Peter if the sick kids ever died, he'd avoided answering. But Lisa had looked at Peter and then at Gilly and said, very matter-of-factly, *Yes, they do*. That had ignited one of the few real fights between her parents that Gilly could remember, and she had been at its center. The question was whether she could handle the truth.

In the end, Gilly made certain strategic elisions in her diary. She never specified what, exactly, her parents were fighting about, because she was less interested in imagining the cause of their conflict than in imagining its effects. She had heard of broken homes, and now she pictured herself inside one: crumbling walls, shattered windows, a crack that split the house along invisible seams.

Around the time that Gilly reached the middle of her diary, where she could see the white thread that kept the whole thing together, she attended her first funeral. The old man who lived next door had died just a few weeks shy of his hundredth birthday. His name was Stu. Gilly hadn't actually seen him in a long time, because he'd been bedridden for the last several years of his life. But even then, his presence detectable only in the movement of curtains or the glow of a lamp, or in the coming and going of the mail, she had thought of him as the secret-keeper of the neighborhood. Not any particular secret—something bigger than that. Some old and essential truth. What she remembered most about Stu was the way that his body had seemed to unveil itself as it declined: the thick blue veins that emerged on the tops of his hands and ensnared his ankles, the spotted skin that appeared as his hair got thinner and thinner, like a cotton ball pulled slowly apart until you could see straight through it.

Gilly had assumed that she would

"Wait, don't look it up. Let's start some rumors."

see Stu one final time, nestled inside a casket, wearing his fanciest clothes. So she was disappointed, standing solemnly in the pews of the church, to learn that there would be no coffin at all. On paper programs distributed at the start of the service, there was only one image, a black-and-white portrait of Stu in his Army uniform. His cheeks had been tinted an implausible pink. Most of the funeral service was devoted to some version of this man—loyal soldier, loving husband, hard worker, good father—who bore little resemblance to the man Gilly thought she'd known. It was not a tearful or even a sombre occasion. People were there, it was said and then repeated, to celebrate a life, not to mourn a death. This, too, in Gilly's opinion, was a disappointment. If those final years of Stu's life had seemed to approach something like a revelation—his translucent skin, his frank and not always appropriate remarks—now everything that had seemed on the brink of being discovered was being covered back up, the fragile, honest core of him retreating into the broad-shouldered frame of a solid family man. And, after all that, they would literally bury him. Gilly tried not to think about it.

Lisa drove them home. She wasn't a better driver than Peter, but she was a worse passenger. While they were stopped at a red light, Lisa said she hadn't realized that Stu had such a big family—such a full life.

"Full of what?" Gilly said from the back seat. She was small for her age, and the seat belt cut uncomfortably into the side of her neck.

"When people are in that much pain, it's hard to imagine what they were like without it," her mother continued.

"He was in pain?"

Why had no one told her that?

"Longer lives aren't necessarily better lives," Lisa said.

"Well," Peter said.

"Well what?"

"We're making huge strides in end-of-life care. And we'll only keep making them. Medicine is advancing faster than ever."

"But striding where? Advancing toward what?" Lisa asked. "Do we even want to get where we're going?"

There was an edge in her voice, which made Gilly lean forward. The seat belt locked.

"Personally, I don't," Lisa continued. "If I make it to eighty, that's enough."

"*Lisa.*"

Peter turned around to look at Gilly, who was still straining against the seat belt. When Lisa glanced at her in the rearview mirror, she stopped struggling. She wanted to look calm, composed. There was nothing more juvenile than the fear of death.

"If you can't ask to be born," Lisa said, looking back at the road, "shouldn't you be allowed to ask to die?"

"You know it's more complicated than that. Doctors take an oath."

"The rest of us don't."

Peter stared out the window, where there was nothing, Gilly thought, worth staring at: identical telephone poles, the same trees planted again and again, just the right amount of space between each house.

"But imagine if we did," he said, pressing his nose against the glass, the way a child might. "Imagine if you had to look every single person in the eye and say what doctors say. *We did everything we could.*"

By the time Gilly's parents said they had something important to tell her, she had almost forgotten about the diary. She had written in it haphazardly. Sometimes, remembering the notebook after an idle period, she would return to it with fresh resolve, writing regularly, usually honestly. But soon resolve would turn into routine, and routine bored her. The entries would get shorter and sloppier, then stop altogether. One day, Gilly had taken the diary off the shelf and put it in a drawer, because the sight of it seemed to accuse her—of what, exactly, she wasn't sure.

Her parents summoned her to the living room. They sat on the couch, perched on the edge of the cushions, close but not touching. There were two chairs across from the couch—for the sake of symmetry—and Gilly was aware, even before she understood what was happening, that no matter which chair she chose she would be throwing something off balance. She hovered between them for a few seconds, then sat down opposite Lisa.

Peter went first. He emphasized the logistics. Lisa was moving into her own house. Well, her own apartment, but it was a spacious apartment.

"It will be good for everyone," he said. "Which doesn't mean it won't be hard for everyone, too."

He spoke slowly, and when he was finished he looked at Lisa expectantly, which meant it was her turn. It meant they were following a script. Peter nodded while Lisa spoke, the way you would nod at someone who is practicing her lines, who has finally got them right. Or almost right—close enough.

That made Gilly angry. In general, she avoided anger. Unlike sadness, or even fear, anger wasn't something you could think about—you could only feel it. Anger was like being trapped, like being in a crowded pool or a packed elevator, except the thing trapping you was you.

"Say it like you mean it," Gilly said. Her voice was loud and high, practically a whine.

"Gilly," her mom said.

"Honey," her dad said.

There was a long silence. Eventually, Peter said something and Lisa repeated it, something they'd already said, like *We'll get through this*. Something that was easy to say and hard to believe. Gilly stormed out of the room, which was the sort of thing angry people did, but already her anger was turning into something else. When she got to the top of the stairs, she waited, listening for what they would say now that the performance was over. There was just more silence and the usual, mysterious creaking of the house, which sounded ominous but wasn't. Peter had explained it to her: the temperature rose and fell, and what sounded like moaning or whispering was just the house contracting and expanding. The house didn't see everything, didn't know anything.

Gilly closed the door to her bedroom and took her diary out of the drawer. She didn't want to open it. A childish thought: if she didn't read it, she might not have written it. If she hadn't done anything, she wouldn't have to undo anything. No guilt, no pain, no panic, no feeling at all.

She made herself do it. She read from the first page to the last page. She had pretended to be an adult, but pretending was no longer a game or a lie or a choice. She had wanted something to happen and now it had.

Gilly became two people. Her time was divided exactly down the middle, because Peter and Lisa believed, above all, in being fair. Half the time she was one person and half the time she was another. It was possible that no one else noticed the difference. She didn't try to explain it and she didn't write it down, because she didn't write anything down anymore. She didn't want to remember—she just wanted to pay attention. The more you paid attention, the more people you became. A different person in different places, a different person on different days. And she was the only one who knew them all.

Soon after the divorce, Lisa got a job at a university in another city. Good jobs were hard to find and this one wasn't bad. It took three hours to drive to the city; she would leave on Mondays, return on Fridays. When Lisa told her the news, Gilly said she would go with her. She was a teen-ager now. They could buy a new house, pick a new school.

"Well," Peter said, looking hurt, confused.

"No," Lisa said.

Later, Peter told Gilly that it was O.K. to be angry at Lisa. He called Lisa *your mom*, which made her sound like a character in a book that Gilly had read and he hadn't. But Gilly wasn't angry. She admired Lisa. She, at least, was becoming a new person. Peter seemed a little sadder and a little fatter—his shirts were tighter and often came untucked—but for the most part he was the same. All his jokes were old jokes. He knew five recipes, which he repeated in the same order every week. The only real thing that had changed was that he'd stopped playing the piano, and even that didn't seem so important; he'd never been a serious musician. He watched reruns on TV instead. Sometimes he didn't remember that he'd already seen the shows unless Gilly reminded him.

She spent every weekend with Lisa. They went out to restaurants and Gilly learned how to pronounce the Italian names of pastas. She pretended that she liked anchovies and mushrooms and cheese that oozed. She pretended for long enough that eventually she didn't have to—she really did like them. Lisa gave her difficult books to read. They took walks in the neighborhood and Lisa told Gilly that there were famous philosophers who believed that walking was necessary for thinking. On some walks, they hardly exchanged a word, which was O.K. Gilly tried to summon big, interesting ideas, in case Lisa asked what she was thinking about, but Lisa never did.

Every evening, Lisa's phone rang and she left the room before answering. Gilly didn't ask if it was a man calling—at Lisa's age, was it still called a boyfriend?—because she knew that if she did Lisa would tell her the truth, without holding anything back. Gilly assumed that the man was also a philosopher. How else could they talk for so long? She had a clear picture of him in her head: tall and noble-looking, with wiry limbs and wiry eyebrows. During one of Lisa's phone calls, Gilly realized that she was picturing an actor from a movie she'd seen years before. A stupid, heartwarming movie—the kind that gets called *family friendly*. After that, she tried to change the picture, to make the man shorter or uglier or just more original, but it didn't work.

Because the picture of the man existed only in her head, because she couldn't get rid of it, it seemed to Gilly as though he came with her wherever she went. Every Sunday evening, he returned with her to Peter's house. He surveyed the scene: the table of unread newspapers, the sink of unwashed dishes, the glass that slipped out of Peter's hand and shattered on the floor. (It was a cheap, ordinary glass. Lisa drank wine in glasses with delicate stems but Peter drank nothing but water, lots and lots of it.) The man watched Peter spring into action. *No bare feet in the kitchen*. He heard the oblivious roar of the vacuum and watched the bird bang against the top of its cage until the noise finally stopped. He saw the tiny piece of glass that got stuck in Gilly's heel anyway, too small to see. If she squeezed the rough skin in the right place, a perfect bead of blood bloomed on the surface.

One Friday, Lisa called at the last minute to say that she wouldn't be back in town—she no longer said *back home*—until the next morning. She had to stay late at the library. This sounded like a lie, the kind of excuse that kids use on their parents, not the other way around. *No problem*, Gilly said. She unpacked her already packed bag.

The library was Lisa's favorite place on campus. She had described it to Gilly in detail: a huge limestone structure designed to look like a church, with desks instead of pews, with stained-glass windows that depicted scholars, not saints. The architecture, Lisa explained, was a kind of joke. At universities, everyone agreed that knowledge was the only thing worth worshipping.

The local public library, where Gilly's books came from, was a dingy building filled with the rubbery smell of steam radiators. Its display table, featuring paperbacks with embossed titles and lurid covers, did not inspire awe. And awe was why Gilly secretly liked real churches. Old, ornate ones, with gilded altars and cushioned kneelers for praying. She hardly ever went inside that kind of church—for Stu's funeral, for a cousin's wedding, for a piano recital—and she never told anyone that she wanted to. Gilly didn't understand the feeling that overtook her there, and afterward she was sometimes ashamed of it: the way her ribs seemed to expand like the vaulted ceiling, the way certain fragile ideas could stay aloft in the dim, cavernous space. Lisa would have called that getting carried away. She was interested in religion (like all ideas, it was worth considering), but interest was the opposite of belief.

BOOK BURIAL

The rabbi says it's good for the departed
if religious texts go down
into the grave with them,
so the soul feels less estranged
in its new circumstances.

Down they go, old volumes of scripture
like Victorian ledgers bound in leather,
thudding on dad's coffin lid
amid the shovelfuls of earth
we mourners are pouring in.

Earth and leather; paper and wood.
Each time another hits,
somewhere in the old Poland or Ukraine
a hasid rocks more fervently,
a zaddik rises from his prayers.

The man of learning,
the man of reason that he was,
is going home now

It turned out that opposites like that were everywhere. Her mother's speaking voice was the opposite of her father's singing voice. Owning a bird was the opposite of wanting a bird. These were opposites that politely masked their differences, that delicately avoided the uncrossable border between them. The image of Stu in his Army uniform was the opposite of the image of Stu in Gilly's head. Reading over her diary was the opposite of spilling herself onto its pages—of thinking that the self was spillable instead of containable, of not understanding what a terrible, permanent mess it could make.

Peter ordered pizza for dinner—a treat. It arrived cold, orange grease thickening on its surface. He asked Gilly questions about school. Her teachers, her friends. Her goals.

"What's on your mind?"

Gilly shrugged. She wiped her fingers on a napkin and pushed away her plate.

The next morning, instead of waiting in the car, as she usually did, Lisa came inside. All the way to the kitchen, which meant that she, too, saw the newspapers and the dishes and the birdcage that hadn't been cleaned in a long time. The bird was sleeping, its neck twisted awkwardly so that it could bury its face in its feathers. Asleep, it looked like it didn't have a head.

Peter and Lisa acted normally around each other. They talked gravely about a story they'd seen in the news—a natural disaster on another continent. It meant the same thing to both of them because it didn't really mean anything to either of them. Unimaginable, they agreed. Gilly would have preferred it if they'd argued.

While her parents discussed global events, she watched the bird wake up. It had a head now. It looked around the room. Did it notice anything different? It lifted one foot, put it back down, lifted the other. This was a familiar ritual, which Peter called the bird's little dance. Alone, Gilly and her father often imitated the dance, but in Lisa's presence it seemed ridiculous. The kitchen seemed crowded. It wasn't big enough for her dad and her mom and the person she was with her dad and the person she was with her mom—not to mention

to a land of unreason, to something like
the lost Lublin or Simferopol,

a land of upside-down hills
where God's black-coated children
dance arm in arm with the trees,
or gaze from high windows
at fires in the sky.

He has no choice: the stay
in the flimsy house of logic
is done. The college can have him
no more. All the trees this blustery morning
are sending him off.

Beside the grave shaft, the heap of earth glistens,
still wet with its own slow life
somewhere beneath the skin of turf
down near the water table,
from which it has briefly risen
into our strange air.

—Henry Shukman

for the man, or the picture of the man.

Her parents insisted that she clean the cage before leaving.

"Right now?"

Gilly saw Peter waver.

"Right now," Lisa said.

They left her by herself in the kitchen. As soon as Gilly unlatched the door, the bird flew out and settled in the fruit bowl, gripping an enormous navel orange. She cleaned half-heartedly. Not for the first time, she regretted ever asking for a bird. Worse than that: begging for one. She vowed never to beg for anything again.

It was only when she stood up with the dustpan of bird poop—bird *shit*, she corrected herself—that Gilly realized the screen door to the back yard was propped open. Her first instinct was the normal one: to drop the dustpan and slam the door and avoid disaster. But she hesitated just long enough that desire overtook instinct. She stood very still. She and the bird looked at each other—bold, insolent looks.

"Go ahead," Gilly said.

The bird's head swivelled back and forth like a toy. When it showed no sign of moving from its perch, Gilly resumed her tasks, but now she took her time. She was slow and deliberate. She wiped down every surface inside the cage. The bird stared at her the whole time, clutching the orange.

They were still locked in this contest when Peter and Lisa came back into the room. They looked from the bird to the screen door, but said nothing. The bird went back in its cage and Gilly followed Lisa out of the house.

Lisa's apartment was not as spacious as she'd promised, but it was furnished sparely and most of the walls were still blank, which made it feel expansive: something that could become another thing. That day, Gilly and Lisa did what they always did. Read and walked and ordered tagliatelle—ribbons dyed black with squid ink, mixed up with the taut rubber bands of the squid themselves. After dinner, they read some more. Any minute now, the phone might ring. Gilly studied Lisa for signs of anticipation. What was she waiting for? What was she hoping for?

But Lisa was absorbed in her book. It looked a lot like the one she had loaned Gilly that afternoon—a volume with an anonymous blue cover and modest block letters (once gold, now yellow) on the spine. She told Gilly that the book had changed her life. It was printed in a tiny font, on delicate paper—thin enough that if Gilly held it up to the light she could see right through. So far, she hadn't understood a single word.

The pages were hard to turn quickly, folding over on themselves and threatening to tear. She started turning two at a time, or ten at a time, however many clung together. The paper made a rustling sound, but Lisa didn't look up. The phone didn't ring. Gilly skipped whole chapters. She had meant to release her anger this way, but now it gained momentum. She paused at a dog-eared page, a page that had mattered to someone else. There was faint pencil in the margins, but she didn't bother reading what had been marked—what had spoken its hidden meaning to a stranger and would not reveal itself to her. She closed the book with a clap.

And still Lisa didn't look up. Didn't ask what was wrong, didn't even see that anything could be wrong.

"Who is he?" Gilly demanded.

The silence broke like glass. Lisa finished the sentence she was reading and marked her place with a finger. It really was a place: somewhere she emerged from, eyes glassy, gaze abstracted.

"Who?"

"That man."

Gilly realized as she said it that she had never actually heard the voice on the other end of the line. She had imagined a deep voice. Long, thoughtful pauses while he searched for exactly the right word. She had imagined heated arguments—the good kind. Not about events but about ideas. Not about your life or our life but about life itself.

Lisa tilted her head to one side. The bird did this, too, which made it seem human—skeptical. *What's on your mind*? Peter would say. When he asked the bird, it was supposed to be funny.

"There's no man, is there?" Gilly said.

Lisa laughed. A gentle laugh—the way you laugh at a child who's made a joke without meaning to. *I don't get it*, Gilly could have said, but she didn't. Lisa looked down and lifted her finger, picking up right where she'd left off. Gilly opened her book, flipped to the first page, and tried to start again. ♦

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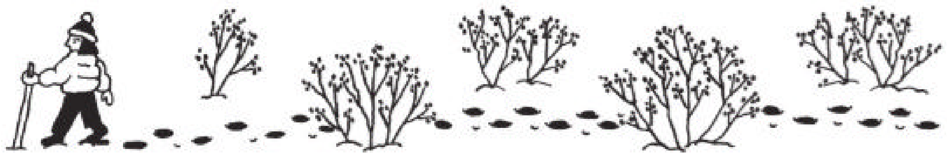
Clare Sestanovich on keeping a diary.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

EAT, PRAY, CONCENTRATE

What monks can teach us about paying attention.

BY CASEY CEP

Who was the monkiest monk of them all? One candidate is Simeon Stylites, who lived alone atop a pillar near Aleppo for at least thirty-five years. Another is Macarius of Alexandria, who pursued his spiritual disciplines for twenty days straight without sleeping. He was perhaps outdone by Caluppa, who never stopped praying, even when snakes filled his cave, slithering under his feet and falling from the ceiling. And then there's Pachomius, who not only managed to maintain his focus on God while living with other monks but also ignored the demons that paraded about his room like soldiers, rattled his walls like an earthquake, and then, in a last-ditch effort to distract him, turned into scantily clad women. Not that women were only distractions. They, too, could have formidable attention spans—like the virgin Sarah, who lived next to a river for sixty years without ever looking at it.

These all-stars of attention are just a few of the monks who populate Jamie Kreiner's new book, "The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us About Distraction" (Liveright). More specifically, they are the exceptions: most of their brethren, like most of us, were terrible at paying attention. All kinds of statistics depict our powers of concentration as depressingly withered, but, as Kreiner shows, medieval monasteries were filled with people who wanted to focus on God but couldn't. Long before televisions or TikTok, smartphones or streaming services, paying attention was already devilishly difficult—literally so, in the case of these monks, since they associated distraction with the Devil.

That would be a problem if Kreiner were promising to cure anyone's screen addiction with this one medieval trick, but she's offering commiseration, not solutions. A professor at the University of Georgia, Kreiner is the author of two other books, "The Social Life of Hagiography in the Merovingian Kingdom" (Cambridge) and "Legions of Pigs in the Early Medieval West" (Yale). As those titles suggest, she is an expert on late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, but, as they might not, she's a wry and wonderful writer. In "The Wandering Mind," she eschews nostalgia, rendering the past as it really was: riotously strange yet, when it comes to the problem of attention, annoyingly familiar. As John of Dalyatha lamented, back in the eighth century, "All I do is eat, sleep, drink, and be negligent."

That particular John started his religious life in a monastery on Qardu, one of the mountains in Turkey where Noah's Ark was said to have landed after the flood. But Kreiner introduces us to a host of other Johns as well: John Climacus, who lived at the foot of Mt. Sinai; John Cassian, who founded the Abbey of St. Victor, in southern Gaul; John of Lycopolis, who lived alone in the Nitrian Desert; and John Moschos, an ascetic fanboy of sorts who travelled the Mediterranean, surveying the life styles of the celibate and destitute. Almost all of Kreiner's subjects are Christian, but, as her Johns alone suggest, they were a cosmopolitan bunch. Her monks hail from Turfan and Toledo and everywhere in between, talking with their Muslim and Zoroastrian and Jewish and Manichaean neighbors, and revealing connections to their Buddhist and Daoist contemporaries.

Kreiner uses the word "monk" inclusively, referring to both men and women, regardless of the form of monasticism that they practiced. During the period covered by "The Wandering Mind"—the fourth through the ninth centuries—monastic orders were still taking shape, their leaders devising and revising rules about sleep, food, work, possessions, and prayer. All these habits of being were an attempt to get closer to God, not least by stripping away worldly distraction, but how best to do so was a matter of constant experiment and debate. Routines and schedules circulated like gossip, with everyone wondering if some other order had arrived at a superior solution to the problem of focus, or yearning to know exactly how the apostle Paul or the Virgin Mary had arranged their days.

One open question was whether monks needed to leave the world to avoid being distracted by it. Not all of them did so: some lived as ascetics in whatever household they found themselves. Macrina, a fourth-century Cappadocian woman, never moved away from her family, refusing to marry and dedicating her life to God. Similarly, not all monks gave up their belongings, since some monasteries allowed them to retain property, including slaves. Even monks who did divest themselves of worldly possessions were sometimes slow to do so, first settling complex tax

ABOVE: LIANA JEGERS

In "The Wandering Mind," we learn that even regulations on work, food, and sexual urges can't vanquish distraction.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERTS RURANS

bills or figuring out how to provide for children or elderly family members. Still, in the centuries that Kreiner studies, Christians donated a full third of all the land within Western Europe—more than a hundred million acres—to monasteries and churches.

The monks who surrendered their property, or never had any to begin with, could choose among several forms of ascetic living. Gyrovagues lived as wanderers, begging for food and whatever else they needed; stylites, like Simeon, lived on top of pillars for long periods, while other monastics hunkered down in caves or hunkered up on crags. Household and itinerant monks were probably far more common than the monks we tend to picture—the so-called eremitic monks, who lived alone, often in remote places, and the cenobitic monks, who lived in intentional communities. That historical blind spot is partly the result of our wealth of information about monasteries, many of which maintained elaborate rule books and records that still survive.

Such documents reveal widely varying strategies for staying focussed on a godly life. Some monasteries screened the mail or prohibited packages; many discouraged visitors, but others welcomed anyone at all, especially pilgrims and donors. Theories about the virtues or evils of outsiders were reflected even in the locations of religious communities. Geretrude of northern Gaul built her monastery in the desolate swamps of the Scarpe River, but Qasr el Banat was built near the busy road between Antioch and Aleppo, so that travellers could find shelter or worship. Plenty of monastics worried that caring for such people could lead to earthly entanglements; even the sacraments were at times seen as suspicious, with leaders discouraging their followers from performing baptisms, because they might create ongoing obligations to the baptized. So extreme was some monks' commitment to forgoing human interaction that they became known for their downcast faces, avoiding eye contact whenever they left their monasteries.

Even the most solitary monks, those who withdrew from both secular society and religious community, soon learned that the world had a way of finding them. Frange, a monk who lived in Egypt during the rule of the Umayyads, moved into a pharaonic tomb to get away from it all, but even without WhatsApp or DoorDash he remained in touch with scores of people, whether to offer a blessing or to arrange a delivery of cardamom. Archeologists working in his tomb discovered ostraca—shards of pottery repurposed as writing slates—only some of which show him wanting to be left alone; in most of them, he is writing intercessory prayers for children or pestering his sister to bring him clothes and food.

As with all who try to devote themselves to ultimate concerns, Frange's resolve was tested by his physical needs. A body isn't like a town or a monastery; you can't move out of it to reduce your worldly distractions. The best hope was to fully transform it, as one fourth-century Syriac poet said of monks:

> Their bodies are temples of the Spirit, their
> minds are churches;
> their prayer is pure incense, and their tears
> are fragrant smoke.

In pursuit of that kind of transformation, monastic communities zealously regulated everything about the body, from the length of facial hair to footwear. What form mortification should take, though, wasn't clear, and the attempt to free the self of all its needs except the need for God can today look like masochism or mayhem. Take bathing, which Romans adored, but which Christians came to regard warily. Some monasteries allowed regular baths, but others restricted them to periods of illness or certain times in the liturgical year, like before Christmas or Easter. A few discouraged them entirely. "I am sixty years of age," the desert mother Silvania once boasted, "and apart from the tips of my hands, neither my feet nor my face nor any one of my limbs ever touched water."

"Don't look now, but Hercules is wearing the exact same thing as you."

Sleeping with anyone was always a no-no, but that prohibition was straightforward compared with the labyrinthine regulations on sleeping in general. To pray without ceasing, as St. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, was sometimes taken as an actual imperative, while other monks acknowledged the necessity of sleep but sought to limit its allure and duration. St. Augustine argued that rich converts should be given plush bedding until they adjusted to monastic life, to deter them from quitting, but at St. John Stoudios, in Constantinople, every novice, regardless of class, got the same bedding—two wool blankets and two mats, one made of straw and the other of goat hair. The monks at Amida, in Mesopotamia, had no beds at all, only reclining seats, wall straps, and ceiling ropes for suspending themselves by their armpits. The monks at Qartamin, near the border between Syria and Turkey, had it worse: some of them slept standing up, in "closet-like cells."

Eating was contentious, too, not to mention competitive. Fasting was said to focus the mind, but since simply starving to death was not an option, monastic leaders imposed drastic rules on the consumption of food. Monasteries restricted the use of condiments, to make sure that all monks ate the same thing, or prohibited monks from looking at one another while eating, so that they couldn't argue about portions. When Lupicinus of Condat thought that his brethren were luxuriating too much in their meals, he dumped everything into one pot and offered them the resulting mush. (Twelve monks were so miffed that they quit.) Hagiographies, like Jerome's "Life of Hilarion," often resembled ancient Grub Street Diets, recording every last detail of people's eating habits. Antony was said to have consumed just one meal a day: bread and salt. Joseph of Beth Qoqa lived off raw foods, while George of Sinai survived on capers "so bitter they could kill a camel." By contrast, some Egyptian monasteries left culinary remnants as rich and varied as King Tut's tomb—jujubes, fenugreek, figs, grapes, pomegranates, fava beans—and the kitchen at the Benedictine monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno could have earned a Michelin star, given its use of elderberries, grapes, and walnuts alongside mollusks, fish, pork, and poultry.

Such abundance isn't evidence of hypocrisy; it's evidence of another dispute about how best to focus on God. Every monastery organized its days around prayer and religious reading, but some holy men argued that physical work should be avoided, to recover the dignity of Adam and Eve, while others believed that it could help them glorify God. Manual labor shored up monasteries' finances and independence, and it could sharpen the mind, too. These centers of worship became centers of agriculture or industry, distinguished, as they are today, for their crops or crafts. Monks who focussed as much on growing things as on knowing things aspired to be paragons of self-sufficiency and sustainability, making their own robes, filling their own pantries, and constructing their own furniture, not to mention writing their own books.

Although books are rarely associated with distraction today, desperate as we are to escape our screens, they were objects of concern in early monastic circles—diversions that might need to be regulated as carefully as sexual urges. Monks hemmed and hawed about when and where and for how long it was appropriate to read. In the fourth century, Evagrius Ponticus, himself an avid reader, described a common scene in the monasteries where he lived in Jerusalem and the Nile Delta: a monk who was supposed to be reading "yawns a lot and readily drifts off into sleep; he rubs his eyes and stretches his arms; turning his eyes away from the book, he stares at the wall and again goes back to read for a while; leafing through the pages, he looks curiously for the end of texts, he counts the folios and calculates the number of gatherings, finds fault with the writing and the ornamentation. Later, he closes the book and puts it under his head and falls asleep."

Evagrius had a name for this inability to focus—acedia—and scholars now

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variously define it as depression (the so-called noonday demon) or spiritual ennui (a kind of sloth). Acedia wasn't caused by books, exactly, since a monk could suffer from it even without reading, but the book was initially as suspect a technology as the smartphone is today. Evagrius argued that demons were cold, so they drew close to monks for warmth, touching their eyes and making them drowsy, especially while they were reading. "The Sayings of the Desert Elders," a fifth-century compilation of monastic wisdom, went further, complaining that books led to their contents being taken for granted: "The Prophets compiled the Scriptures, and the Fathers copied them, and their successors learned to repeat them by heart. Then this generation came and placed them in cupboards as useless things."

Nostalgia, like narcissism, can arise from small differences. Compared with a monk like Jonas of Thmoushons—a man so devout that he refused a bed, rested on a stool in the dark while reciting Scripture, and had to be buried in that position because his body wouldn't straighten—monks who just sat around reading could seem hardly worthy of the title. But monasteries largely got over such concerns, and became repositories of books—slowly, of course, since their scribes copied every volume by hand. Wearmouth-Jarrow, where the Venerable Bede spent his life, had just two hundred or so books, yet it was the largest library in England. Earlier ascetics had given up everything, including their copies of the Gospels, but their successors came to believe that books could be objects, and even sources, of focus.

Giving up everything isn't possible, of course: every body has a brain, and the brain is the greatest distraction technology of all. Half of "The Wandering Mind" is about how monks tried to maintain focus in the face of the world, their communities, their bodies, and their books, but the other half is about what they thought about thinking. Kreiner is fascinating on the ways monks attempted to manipulate their memories and remake their minds, and on the urgency they brought to those tasks, knowing the dangers that lurked even if they eliminated all physical temptations. A monk singing in church could be revelling in the memory of a delicious meal, while another, praying in her cell, might mistake the wanderings of her own mind for divine revelation.

Kreiner compares the minds of medieval monastics to construction sites, describing the machinery they employed "to reorganize their past thoughts, draw themselves deeper into present thoughts, and establish new cognitive patterns for the future." Some of this is World Memory Championships territory, with monks using mnemonic devices and multisensory prompts to stuff their brains with Biblical texts and holy meditations. Today, we think mostly of memory palaces, but many medieval monks turned to images of trees or ladders to create elaborate visualizations, meant not only to encode good knowledge but also to override bad impulses and sinful memories. Other imagery flourished, too. By the twelfth century, the six-winged angel described by the prophet Isaiah doubled as what Kreiner calls an "organizational avatar," with monks inscribing holy subtopics on each wing and feather, while other monks filled an imaginary Noah's Ark twosie-twosie with sacred history and theology.

Whether monks built arks, angels, or palaces, vigilance was expected of them all, and metacognition was one of their most critical duties, necessary for determining whether any given thought served God or the Devil. For the truly devout, there was no such thing as overthinking it; discernment required constantly monitoring one's mental activity and interrogating the source of any distraction. Some monasteries encouraged monks to use checklists for reviewing their thoughts throughout the day, and one of the desert fathers was said to keep two baskets for tracking his own. He put a stone in one basket whenever he had a virtuous thought and a stone in the other whenever he had a sinful thought; whether he ate dinner depended on which basket had more stones by the end of the day.

Such careful study of the mind yielded gorgeous writing about it, and Kreiner collects centuries' worth of metaphors for concentration (fish swimming peaceably in the depths, helmsmen steering a ship through storms, potters perfecting their ware, hens sitting atop their eggs) and just as many metaphors for distraction (mice taking over your home, flies swarming your face, hair poking you in the eyes, horses breaking out of your barn). These earthy, analog metaphors, though, betray the centuries between us and the monks who wrote them. For all that "The Wandering Mind" helps to collapse the differences between their world and ours, it also illuminates one very profound distinction. We inherited the monkish obsession with attention, and even inherited their moral judgments about the capacity, or failure, to concentrate. But most of us did not inherit their clarity about what is worthy of our concentration.

Medieval monks shared a common cosmology that depended on their attention. Justinian the Great claimed that if monks lived holy lives they could bring God's favor upon the whole of the Byzantine Empire, and the prayers of Simeon Stylites were said to be like support beams, holding up all of creation. "Distraction was not just a personal problem, they knew; it was part of the warp of the world," Kreiner writes. "Attention would not have been morally necessary, would not have been the objective of their culture of conflict and control, were it not for the fact that it centered on the divine order."

Perhaps that is why so many of us have half-done tasks on our to-do lists and half-read books on our bedside tables, scroll through Instagram while simultaneously semi-watching Netflix, and swipe between apps and tabs endlessly, from when we first open our eyes until we finally fall asleep. One uncomfortable explanation for why so many aspects of modern life corrode our attention is that they do not merit it. The problem for those of us who don't live in monasteries but hope to make good use of our days is figuring out what might. That is the real contribution of "The Wandering Mind": it moves beyond the question of why the mind wanders to the more difficult, more beautiful question of where it should rest. ♦

BOOKS

FALLING BEHIND

What's the matter with men?

BY IDREES KAHLOON

Gender equality, Richard V. Reeves contends, now calls for a focus on male deficits.

First, there was Adam, whose creation takes center stage on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Then, fashioned out of Adam's spare rib, there was Eve, relegated to a smaller panel. In Michelangelo's rendition, as in the Bible's, the first man sleeps through the miraculous creation of his soul mate, the first woman and the eventual mother of humanity. Many of our foundational myths are, in this way, stories about men, related by men to other men. The notion of female equality is, historically, an innovation. "Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in "The Second Sex," published in 1949. "And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change." Nearly three-quarters of a century later, that change has continued. By a variety of metrics, men are falling behind parity. Is the second sex becoming the better half?

Many social scientists agree that contemporary American men are mired in malaise, even as they disagree about the causes. In academic performance, boys are well behind girls in elementary school, high school, and college, where the sex ratio is approaching two female undergraduates for every one male. (It was an even split at the start of the nineteen-eighties.) Rage among self-designated "incels" and other elements of the online "manosphere" appears to be steering some impressionable teens toward misogyny. Men are increasingly dropping out of work during their prime working years, overdosing, drinking themselves to death, and generally dying earlier, including by suicide. And men are powering the new brand of reactionary Republican politics, premised on a return to better times, when America was great—and, unsubtly, when men could really be men. The question is what to make of the paroxysm. For the revanchist right, the plight of American men is existential. It is an affront to biological (and perhaps Biblical) determinism, a threat to an entire social order. Yet, for all the strides that women have made since gaining the right to vote, the highest echelons of power remain lopsidedly male. The detoxification of masculinity, progressives say, is a messy and necessary process; sore losers of undeserved privilege don't merit much sympathy.

Richard V. Reeves, a British American scholar of inequality and social mobility, and a self-described "conscientious objector in the culture wars," would like to skip past the moralizing and analyze men in the state that he finds them: beset by bewildering changes that they cannot adapt to. His latest book, "Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It" (Brookings), argues that the rapid liberation of women and the labor-market shift toward brains and away from brawn have left men bereft of what the sociologist David Morgan calls "ontological security." They now confront the prospect of "cultural redundancy," Reeves writes. He sees telltale signs in the way that boys are floundering at school and men are leaving work and failing to perform their paternal obligations. All this, he says, has landed hardest on Black men, whose life prospects have been decimated by decades of mass incarceration, and on men without college degrees, whose wages have fallen in real terms, whose life expectancies have dropped markedly, and whose families are fracturing at astonishing rates. Things have become so bad, so quickly, that emergency social repairs are needed. "It is like the needles on a magnetic compass reversing their polarity," Reeves writes. "Suddenly, working for gender equality means focusing on boys rather than girls."

That either-or can be disputed; the transformed social landscape that men face cannot. When Beauvoir was writing her manifesto on the plight of women,

ILLUSTRATION BY GOLDEN COSMOS

she noted that "the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women," and that "a man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male." Nowadays, there are many such books. Self-doubt has broken through the supposed imperviousness of masculine self-belief. Reeves's book is only the latest; it is also one of the most cogent. That's not just a consequence of his compelling procession of statistical findings. It's also due to the originality of his crisply expressed thesis: that men's struggles are not reducible to a masculinity that is too toxic or too enfeebled but, rather, reflect the workings of the same structural forces that apply to every other group.

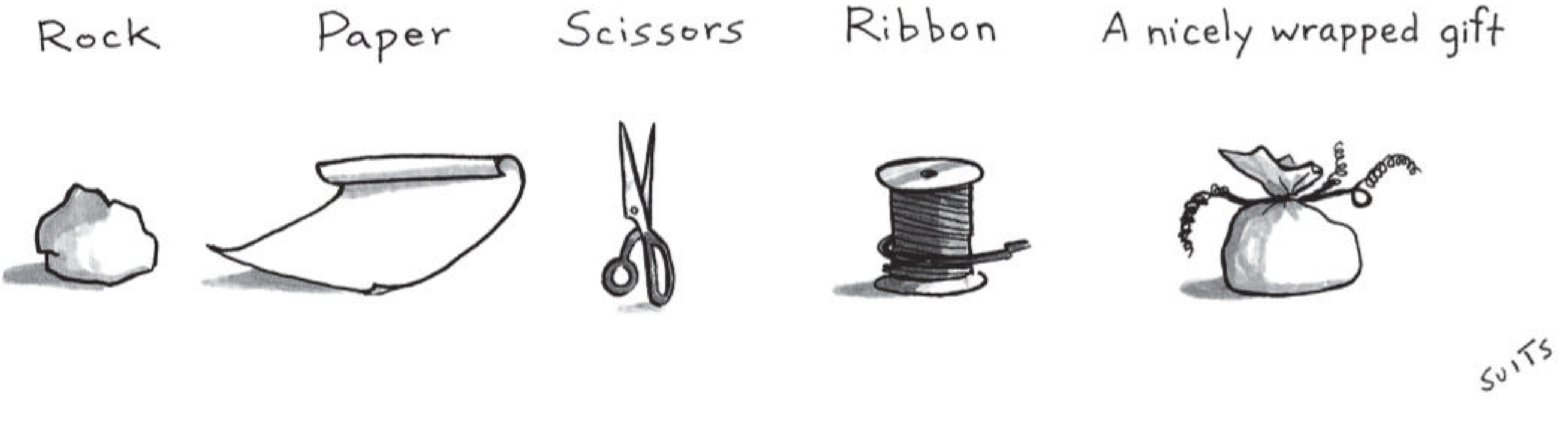
Reeves excels in relaying uncomfortable truths to his fellow-liberals—a talent that he displayed in his previous book, "Dream Hoarders," about how well-meaning, college-educated parents are hindering social mobility. Still, he says, when he brought up the idea for "Of Boys and Men," many people tried to discourage him from writing it. Progressives are generally happier to discuss current social disparities that go in the expected direction (such as the Black-white gap in life expectancy) than those which don't (the fact, say, that life expectancy among Hispanics is slightly higher than among non-Hispanic whites). Besides, if our model of gender politics is zero-sum, the educational and economic decline of men may even be welcome. Women had to endure centuries of subjugation and discrimination; should we really be alarmed that they are just now managing to overshoot gender parity in a few domains?

"Of Boys and Men" argues for a speedy response because the decline in the fortunes of present-day men—not only in comparison with women but in absolute terms—augurs so poorly for men several decades on. "As far as I can tell, nobody predicted that women would overtake men so rapidly, so comprehensively, or so consistently around the world," Reeves writes. He notes that schoolgirls outperform schoolboys both in advanced countries that still struggle with considerable sexism, such as South Korea, and in notably egalitarian countries like Sweden (where researchers say they are confronting a *pojkkrisen*, or "boy crisis"). In 2009, American high-school students in the top ten per cent of their freshman class were twice as likely to be female. Boys, meanwhile, are at least twice as likely to be diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and twice as likely to be suspended; their dropout rates, too, are considerably higher than those of their female counterparts. Young men are also four times as likely to die from suicide.

This story pushes to the side the male-favoring disparities in the world of work. The gender pay gap is usually described by noting that a woman earns eighty-four cents for every dollar earned by a man (though this is up from sixty-four cents in 1980). Barely one-tenth of the C.E.O.s in the Fortune 500 are women (and that is itself a twenty-six-fold increase since 2000, when only two women were in the club). The #MeToo movement began just five years ago; the sexual harassment that women face has hardly been extinguished. Even in the workplace, however, gender convergence may be arriving sooner than anticipated. An axiom of policymaking is that disparate educational achievement today will manifest in disparate earnings later. Reeves points out that women earn roughly three-fifths of all bachelor's and master's degrees awarded. They are the majority of current medical and law students. And they've made extraordinary gains in subjects where they had once been highly underrepresented; they now constitute a third of current graduates in STEM fields and more than forty per cent of students in business schools.

Much of the gender gap in pay, as Claudia Goldin, a labor economist at Harvard, notes, is driven not by direct discrimination—our conventional understanding of a sexist boss paying a female employee less than an identically situated male one—but by differences in occupational choice. A more elusive target has been indirect forms of discrimination, including those sustained by social conditioning (which helps explain the gender skew of certain occupations) and domestic arrangements that favor men. Within occupations, there's often no wage gap until women have children and reduce their work hours. "For most women, having a child is the economic equivalent of being hit by a meteorite," Reeves observes. "For most men, it barely makes a dent." Goldin's analysis is blunt: "The gender gap in hourly compensation would vanish if long, inflexible work days and weeks weren't profitable to employers." Yet there may be reason for optimism. The years-long pandemic and the subsequent labor shortage have forced employers to be more flexible in scheduling—particularly within the most highly remunerated white-collar professions. If that situation endures, the gender pay gap could continue its decline, and boardrooms may become more balanced by attrition.

Good things can also come about for bad reasons, though. Even if, as the French economist Thomas Piketty has suggested, global wars have helped reduce inequality between the rich and the poor, egalitarians should hesitate to become warmongers. And so it's chasten-

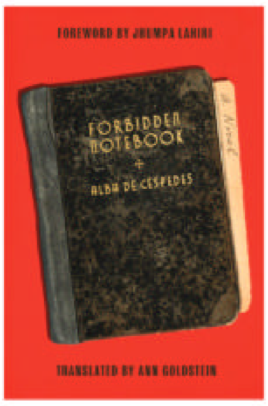


ing to realize that the substantial decline in the gender earnings gap is partly the result of stagnating wages for working men (which have not grown appreciably in the past half century, adjusting for inflation), and partly of the steady creep in the number of men who drop out of the labor force entirely.

We have some idea of why blue-collar wages have stagnated: a macroeconomic shift that greatly raised the value of a college degree, owing in part to the decimation of manual labor by automation and globalization. White men experienced a specific blow that Black men had felt earlier and even more acutely. In a classic study, "The Truly Disadvantaged," the sociologist William Julius Wilson argued that early waves of deindustrialization after the Second World War devastated the lives of working-class African Americans, who were buffeted both by economic forces, in the form of greater rates of joblessness, and by social ones, including worsened prospects for marriage. Later came the effects of the so-called China shock—the contraction of American manufacturing, a male-skewing sector, as a result of increased trade. David Autor, an economist at M.I.T., estimates that normalizing trade relations with China in 2001 cost as many as two million American jobs, often in places that had not recovered even a decade later. A shelf of popular books about the white working class—Arlie Hochschild's "Strangers in Their Own Land," Amy Goldstein's "Janesville," even the newly minted senator J. D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy"—have sought to reckon with the social consequences of these economic transformations. None of them conveys much optimism.

What should we make of the growing tendency of men to drop out of the workforce? In the past half century, fewer and fewer men have returned to work after each recession—like a ball that can never match its previous height as it rebounds. In 1960, ninety-seven per cent of men of "prime age," between twenty-five and fifty-four, were working. Today, close to one in nine prime-age men is neither working nor seeking work. In the recently reissued "Men Without Work: Post-Pandemic Edition" (Templeton), the conservative demographer and economist Nicholas Eberstadt points out that men are now employed

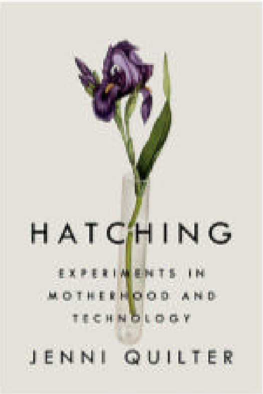
BRIEFLY NOTED



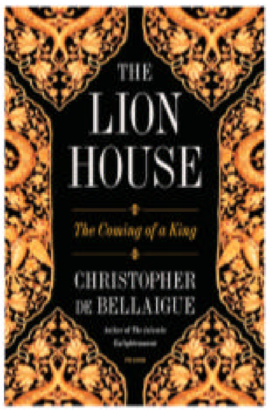
Forbidden Notebook, *by Alba de Céspedes, translated from the Italian by Ann Goldstein (Astra House).* Published in Italy in 1952, this intimate, quietly subversive novel is told through the increasingly frantic secret diary entries of a woman named Valeria. Against a backdrop of postwar trauma and deprivation, Valeria struggles with her household's finances, a romance with her boss, her husband's professional dissatisfactions, and her grownup children's love affairs. Confiding these tensions to her diary—the only outlet for expression in her cramped life—she awakens to society's treatment of working wives and confronts a deep ambivalence toward her husband and children. She concludes that all women, to make sense of their world, "hide a black notebook, a forbidden diary. And they all have to destroy it."

THIS AFTERLIFE
A. E. STALLINGS
SELECTED POEMS

This Afterlife, *by A. E. Stallings (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* In this volume of selected and uncollected poems, Stallings's formal ingenuity lends a music to her philosophically and narratively compelling verse. She draws inspiration from daily domestic life and from the mythology and history of Greece, where she resides, crafting clever yet profound meditations on love, motherhood, language, and time. A particular pleasure is seeing certain personae—Persephone, Daphne, and Alice (of Wonderland)—recur throughout, accompanied by ever-deepening resonances. "Song for the Women Poets" ends, "And part of you leaves Tartarus, / But part stays there to dwell— / You who are both Orpheus / And She he left in Hell."



Hatching, *by Jenni Quilter (Riverhead).* Quilter's memoir of conceiving a child through I.V.F. provides a history of the treatment and a sharp interrogation of her experiences. Recalling that she came to I.V.F. "driven by grief and fear and desire to take a course of action that is hard enough to endure, let alone question at the same time," she asks how much of the yearning for a child is personal and how much is historically and culturally conditioned. How do we rethink reproductive technologies so that they don't reproduce conservative ideas of motherhood, class, and race? Quilter notes that I.V.F. "anticipates the general tone of motherhood before you are even pregnant because it anticipates, even mimics, the notion of justified pain."



The Lion House, *by Christopher de Bellaigue (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* Centering on the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent, which sparked the Ottoman Empire's vast expansion in the sixteenth century, this tightly woven history depicts a Machiavellian world in which Ottoman and European leaders bargained ruthlessly over land, ships, and people. With cinematic sweep and a dash of humor, de Bellaigue tracks fast-flowing shifts of power among the ambitious: illegitimate sons become diplomats, foreign consorts are crowned queens, pirates turn pashas, and slaves are promoted to grand viziers. De Bellaigue is alert to a fragility inherent in empires, where even the most influential ministers have "power to enact the will of God or violate it" only while royal favor lasts.

at roughly the same rate as in 1940, back when America was still recovering from the Great Depression. Citing time-use surveys—the detailed diaries that the Bureau of Labor Statistics compiles on how Americans spend their days—Eberstadt reports that most of these hours of free time are spent watching screens rather than doing household labor or caring for family members. Instead of socializing more, men without work are even less involved in their communities than those with jobs. The available data suggest that their lot is not a happy one.

It would help if we had a firm grasp on why men are withdrawing from work. Many economists have theories. Eberstadt believes that "something like infantilization besets some un-working men." He notes the availability of disability-insurance programs (roughly a third of nonworking men reported some kind of disability in 2016) and the over-all expansion of the social safety net after the nineteen-sixties. In 2017, the late Alan Krueger, who chaired President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers, calculated that nearly half of all nonworking men were taking pain medication on a daily basis, and argued that the increased prescribing of opioids could explain a lot of the decline in the male labor force. Erik Hurst, an economist at the University of Chicago, thinks that the rapid improvement in video-game quality could account for much of the especially deep drop in work among younger men. Anyone who has recently played (or momentarily lost a loved one to) Elden Ring or God of War Ragnarök can grasp the immersive spell that video games cast. But, in the end, most economists admit that they cannot settle on an exact etiology for the problem of nonworking men. The former Treasury Secretary and Harvard president Larry Summers, who is not known for his intellectual humility, recently surmised that "the answers here lie more in the realm of sociology than they do in economics." Reeves, too, thinks that we can't explain the economic decline of men without looking at noneconomic factors: "It is not that men have fewer opportunities. It is that they are not taking them."

An intersectional approach may prove useful here. Consider a recent landmark study of income-tax returns, in which it was definitively established that Black Americans go on to earn substantially less than whites even if their parents were similarly wealthy. Remarkably, the gap is due entirely to the differing prospects for Black men relative to white men. In fact, Black women earn slightly *more* than white women who came from economically matched households. Sex-specific variables—like the extraordinarily high rate of incarceration among Black men—are evidently holding back progress. Although boys are as likely as girls to grow up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty or in fractured families (sex at birth being almost a pure coin toss), an emerging body of evidence suggests that boys may be less resilient to such adversity. In a paper titled "The Trouble with Boys," the economists Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan found that "boys raised outside of a traditional family (with two biological parents present) fare especially poorly," with substantially worse behavior in school and considerably lower skills in "noncognitive" areas, such as emotional sensitivity and persistence, that increasingly matter in the workplace. The gender gap in school suspensions, already large, more than doubles among children with single mothers.

Reeves offers a wide menu of policies designed to foster a "prosocial masculinity for a postfeminist world." He would encourage more men to become nurses and teachers, expand paid leave, and create a thousand more vocational high schools. His signature idea, though, is to "redshirt" boys and give them all, by default, an extra year of kindergarten. The aim is to compensate for their slower rates of adolescent brain development, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which controls decision-making. Reeves, who places great stock in this biological difference, also places great stock in his proposed remedy: "A raft of studies of redshirted boys have shown dramatic reductions in hyperactivity and inattention through the elementary school years, higher levels of life satisfaction, lower chances of being held back a grade later, and higher test scores."

If that sounds too good to be true, it may well be. One of the studies he cites concludes that "there is little evidence that being older than one's classmates has any long-term, positive effect on adult outcomes such as IQ, earnings, or educational attainment"; on the contrary, it finds "substantial evidence" that the practice is linked to higher high-school-dropout rates and lower over-all earnings. Reeves insists that he'd be vindicated if the protocol were applied more widely, but his case isn't very strong. We might hesitate before prescribing half the population an unusually strong and uncertain medicine. Still, he is at least proposing serious solutions. Many of his fellow-liberals remain undecided about whether below-par outcomes for males even merit attention, let alone efforts to remedy them.

The political right has eagerly filled the void. At the 2021 National Conservatism Conference, the Republican senator Josh Hawley gave a keynote speech on the crisis of masculinity, in which he blamed "an effort the left has been at for years now," guided by the premise that "the deconstruction of America begins with and depends on the deconstruction of American men." Hawley, who is planning to expound upon his thoughts in a forthcoming book titled "Manhood," argued that the solution must begin with "repudiating the lie that America is systemically oppressive and men are systematically responsible," and with rebuilding "those manufacturing and production sectors that so much of the chattering class has written off as relics of the past."

Meanwhile, the mass-market appeal of the contentious cultural commentator Jordan Peterson suggests an appetite for quasi-spiritual self-help ("Stand up straight with your shoulders back") in a secular age—Goop for young men. The vintage machismo that Donald Trump so prizes may explain why the gender gap in the popular opinion of him was so large. And the swing among Hispanic voters toward Republicans is being driven, in no small part, by Hispanic men. How men are faring in school and at work may not arouse everyone's concern, but how men choose to pursue politics inevitably affects us all.

Gender theorists have described a perennial struggle among multiple masculinities. In this scenario, nobody who values the prospect of eliminating gender hierarchies can afford to be a bystander. Masculinity is fragile; it's also malleable. The shapes it will assume in the future have consequences. ♦

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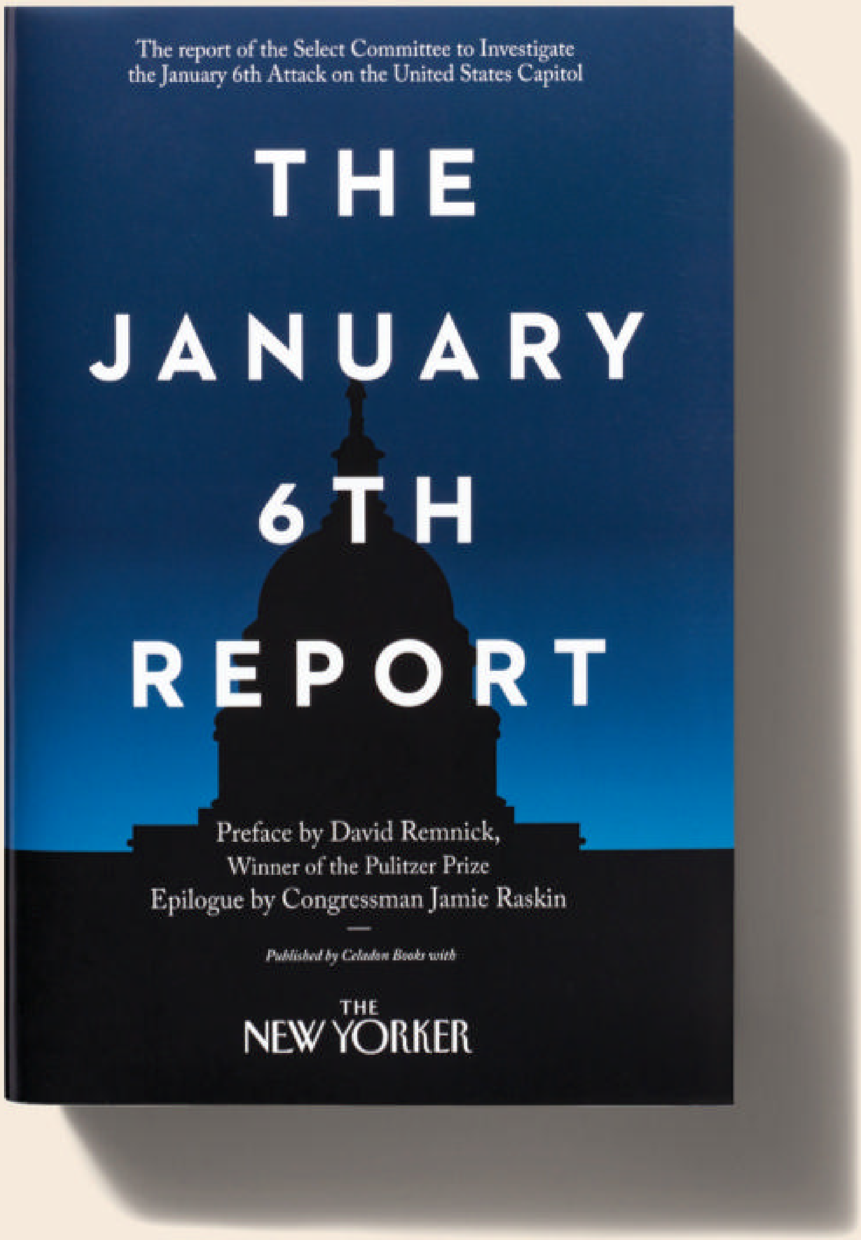
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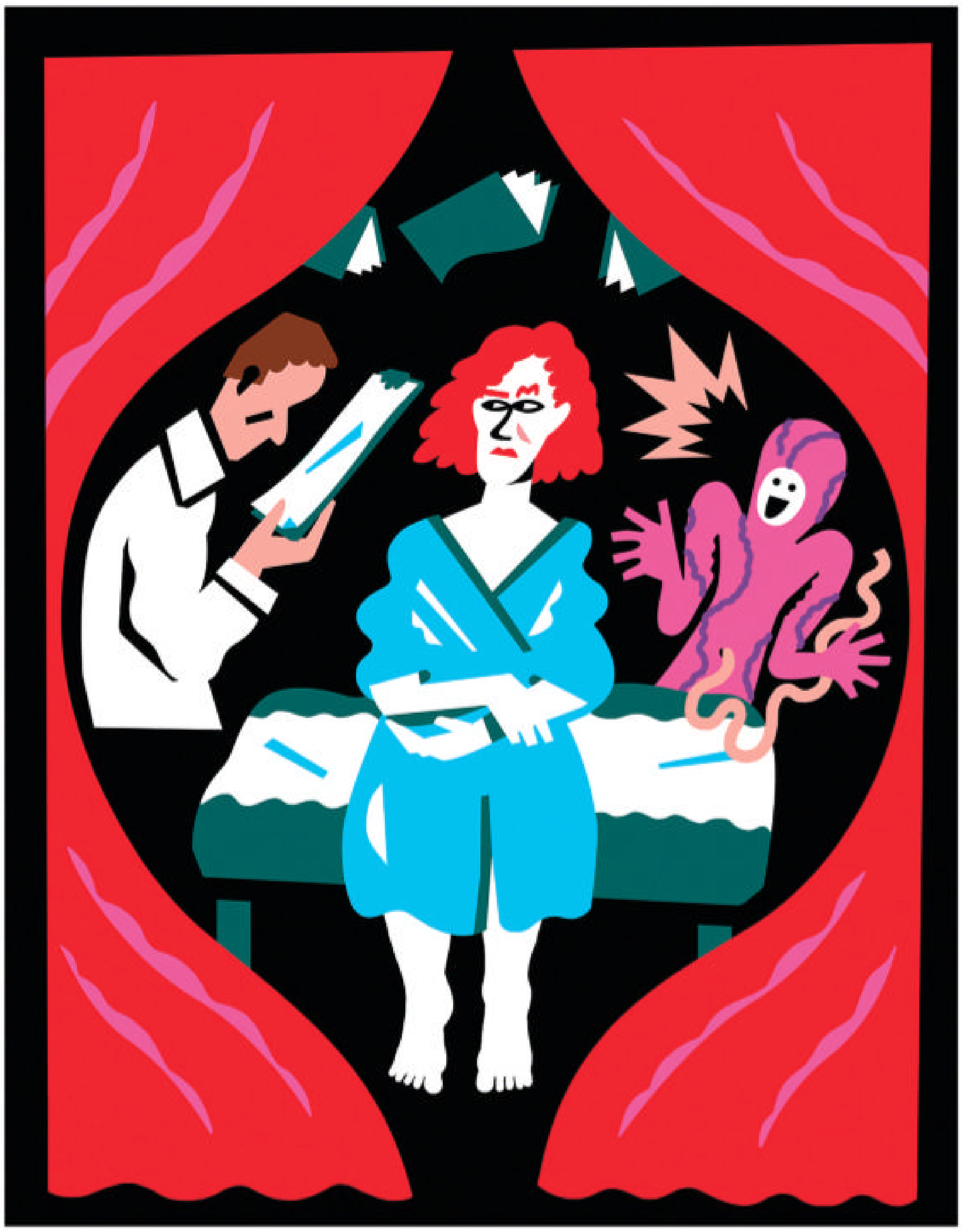
THE THEATRE

PRO CHOICE

"The Appointment" skewers the hypocrisy of the abortion debate.

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



In this gleefully spiky musical, a chorus of fetuses sing, dance, and tell jokes.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

It's usually the anti-abortion activists—the sign-wavers outside clinics, the tellers of post-op horror stories—who want to show you, in great detail, what a fetus looks like. There's something about the peach-and-hibiscus shock of flesh and blood, about the smallness of that embryonic presence: the picture is supposed to appall you into some new way of thinking and feeling about the politics of birth. It's only right, then, that the first big laugh of the raucously pro-choice musical "The Appointment," by the Philadelphia-based theatre collective Lightning Rod Special, directed by Eva Steinmetz at WP Theatre, is earned with a similar kind of representation.

When the curtain opens, there's a fetus onstage, moving slowly and subtly, as if bobbing in fluid. It's soon joined by several others. We know they're fetuses precisely because of those images we've seen used as agitprop, even if we've strained to avoid them. The fetuses are played by members of Lightning Rod Special—Katie Gould, Jaime Maseda, Lee Minora, Brett Ashley Robinson, Scott R. Sheppard, Alice Yorke, and Danny Wilfred, all vibrating with talent and hip smarts—wearing skintight, skin-colored suits marbled with purplish-gray veins. From their tummies sprout ropelike umbilical cords.

These outfits, funny and gross, are emblematic of the show's approach to abortion—instead of treating it as an "issue" to be regarded from a respectful and pious distance, "The Appointment" sniffs out taboos and hunts them down at the pace of a sprint. Here's a taboo for you: the chorus of fetuses turn out to be the play's main characters—or, at least, they get the most stage time. They sing and dance and tell jokes (the book is by Yorke, Steinmetz, Sheppard, and Alex Bechtel, who also wrote the music); they engage in crowd work with the audience. They're obnoxious and needy, selfish and demanding. The fetuses are stage-hogging hams—which makes sense, given how much of the national political spotlight, in Supreme Court hearings and state legislative chambers and on referendum ballots, they've become accustomed to.

They even talk about their futures. When one cries out, "I was going to cure cancer!," another retorts, "Oh Reginald you're a gambler not a doctor!" Yet another forecasts a humbler fate: "I was going to be on 'Tiger King'!" The only way to herd them offstage is to give them the "hook." That show-biz cliché has a pointed meaning here. A glinting surgical instrument shows up time and again to stop the incessant fetal chatter.

"The Appointment" is, in truth, less a musical than a kind of cabaret or variety show. Think of a gleefully spiky, feminist version of "The Carol Burnett Show," or a special episode of the early, punk-fuelled "Saturday Night Live." (The big, padded heads of the fetus costumes reminded me more than once of Eddie Murphy's Gumby getup.) The only real story comes when the fetuses are offstage. A woman, Louise Peterson, played with stoic calm by Yorke, goes to a clinic to get an abortion. She wears a paper gown and is attended to by a cheerful, professional medical assistant named Oliver, played by Wilfred. ("Ooh I like your socks!" he says.) Over and over, Louise is asked her date of birth: "07/24/89," she keeps saying with a cool patience.

Assuming that the action of the play is happening in 2023, Louise is a thirty-three-year-old woman, grown, fully aware of what she's doing. In what feels like the only totally sincere song of the show, she sings:

> I don't feel confused.
> And I don't feel lazy.
> I don't feel regret.
> And I don't feel fucking dumb.

That's a sharp contrast with the cautionary video that Louise's doctor is legally obligated to play for her and the other women with whom she awkwardly sits in the clinic's waiting room. Dr. Parsons (Sheppard) seems kind, and is palpably mortified by the procedural obstacles he has to put these women through—including a twenty-four-hour waiting period that might be the true span of the play, the fetuses hanging on to one last planetary twirl under the lights. The video shows a long, melodramatic aria sung by regretful former abortion patients, performed, ironically, by the men in Lightning Rod Special's company. "Get me a razor, so I can erase all the pain," one of them howls.

Another legal necessity: Louise has to look at a picture—not one of those gruesome hyperreal photographs that show up at rallies but a sonogram. Dr. Parsons asks her to explain what she sees. "I just have to write something down," he says. The people who make laws like this think, one supposes, that the sonogram image, a staticky moon landing in monochrome, might occasion a last-ditch upheaval in the pregnant woman's heart. But to Louise the picture is an abstraction. She describes it in a befuddled ekphrasis, like an art student looking at an obscure slide, bringing none of its ideological weight to the task. "I mean it's blurry. It's kind of . . . moving a little bit," she says. "It's in black and white—I don't know."

All this business about images is tricky, and tetchy, and strange. It's easy to imagine a pro-choice argument against "The Appointment"—that, despite the satiric intentions of its creators, there's just too much risk involved in representing fetuses as persons, or in airing the arguments of anti-abortionists. The fetuses parrot and parodize pro-choice analogies—inherently visual—about their size. "Guess what, mommy? I'm as big as an olive," one says. "I'm as big as a hot fudge sundae with a little cherry on top and I'm sweet like one, too. But don't eat me please!" another pleads.

But the fetuses also paint pictures of life outside the womb. They fantasize about having a nice dad. ("My dream daddy subsidizes my life as an artist.") They make promises to the women who may or may not bring them to term. "We'll make you feel so whole—we're what you dreamed of," they sing. "Tiny, but filled with soul." In promotional materials, the members of Lightning Rod Special assert, by way of explaining their rationale for restaging this show, which premièred in 2019, that "the need for people to confront their participation in the systems that got us here is more pressing than ever." (By "here," of course, they mean life after the recent repeal of the constitutional right to an abortion, following the Supreme Court's Dobbs v. Jackson decision, last summer.)

But the show does something else entirely. Instead of excoriating the audience for its complicity, it mashes our faces into the scattered, swept-aside mess of images and tropes that are linked umbilically with abortion in our minds and cultural memories. It asks us whether it matters, or how much it matters, how we envision the fetus—as a bean, or a taco, or a ghost, or a smear on a screen, or even, most harrowingly, as a person with a daddy and a nascent sense of humor. The play makes you look at all of this, forcing you to court, with squirm-inducing clarity, the imaginings that come by way of looking.

In a poem titled "Orlando," recently published in *The Nation*, the writer Megan Fernandes indulges in the same kind of unmournful speculation about what might have become, in an alternate reality, of an aborted child:

> . . . I think he'd be
> a drummer and wear green. I have no regrets,
> but I wonder if he's waiting in the sky somewhere
> or doing blow in another dimension where he's a rocker
> and very much flesh.

Fernandes echoes Anne Sexton, who, considering "this baby that I bleed," wrote stoically, "Somebody who should have been born / is gone." The daring, unspoken claim of "The Appointment" is that here, post-Dobbs, with abortion up in the air and out in the open yet again, more perilously than ever, there's really no harm in pictures or possible futures, counterfactuals or graven images. Let them multiply. You might even get a laugh. ♦

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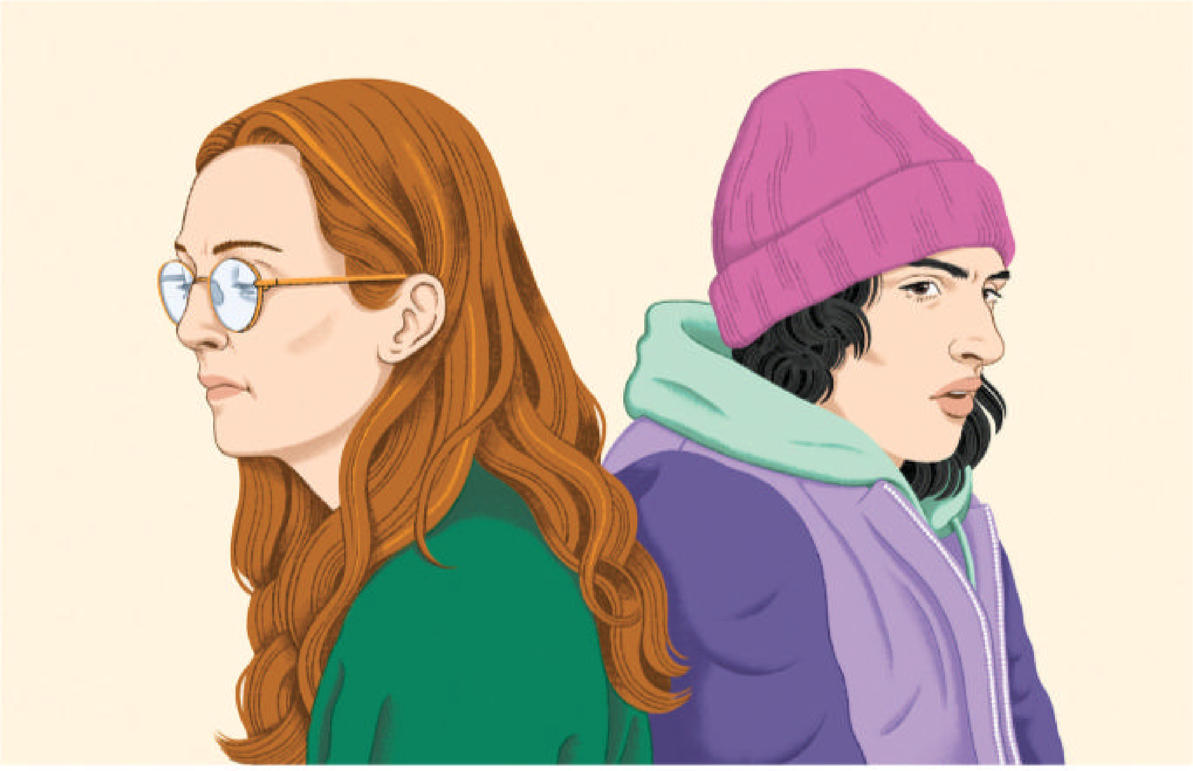
THE CURRENT CINEMA

GROWING PAINS

"When You Finish Saving the World" and "Close."

BY ANTHONY LANE

It comes as a surprise to learn that "When You Finish Saving the World," a new film directed by Jesse Eisenberg, is also the *first* film directed by Jesse Eisenberg. Really? I could have sworn he'd taken charge before. He's one of those actors who become de-facto auteurs, imbuing a story so richly with their manners, or their moods, that it feels like their own creation. In Eisenberg's case, "The Double" (2013), "Louder Than Bombs" (2015), and "The Art of Self-Defense" (2019), all of them made by other directors, are galvanized by his nervous electricity. As he stares at the surrounding characters, furrowing his brow and twitching with unease, you can see their self-possession starting to waver. There you have it: Eisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.



Julianne Moore and Finn Wolfhard star in Jesse Eisenberg's directorial début.

Although he doesn't appear in the new movie, and delegates his staring duties to the camera, the principle is upheld. No one here could be accused, even temporarily, of contentment. Welcome to the Katz family, of Bloomington, Indiana—a huge and boisterous clan numbering precisely three. Sometimes they even talk at dinner. Roger (Jay O. Sanders) is the head of the household, but a severed head; seldom without a glass of wine, he prefers to slip upstairs, wise fellow, to read a book. Evelyn (Julianne Moore), his wife, runs a local women's shelter. Completing the picture is their only child, Ziggy (Finn Wolfhard), aged seventeen, who hibernates in his room. There, facing his computer, he plays guitar and sings to a growing and, it must be said, undiscerning bunch of fans. Ziggy calls his music "classic folk rock with alternative influences." "I don't know what that means," his father says. What exasperates Ziggy, apart from absolutely everything, is being interrupted by Evelyn while he's live-streaming. "What's 'live-streaming'?" she asks. I was reminded of the mother from New Jersey, sublimely cited in the *Onion*, ten years ago, "who asked if the internet was as good as the online."

Few zones have been more thoroughly scouted onscreen than the generation gap. There will always be rebels, with or without causes, as well as fears that the gap will widen into a ravine. Ziggy and Evelyn are different, perhaps, because of the urgency with which they seek amends for a lack of affection in the home. Ziggy falls for a girl at school, Lila (Alisha Boe), when he hears her read one of her poems. "It's actually tera-sophisticated," he says. "Thanks for the validation," she replies. (Eisenberg has a keen ear for the patois. Ziggy's most frequent term of praise is "lift.") Having set the poem to music, which is cool, he then brags to Lila about making *money* from it. Not cool. His mother, meanwhile, develops an interest—at first kindly, then unhealthy—in a teen-ager, Kyle (Billy Bryk), the son of a woman who has arrived at the shelter after fleeing an abusive partner. So obsessed is Evelyn that she takes Kyle out for dinner at an Ethiopian place. It must be love.

If you are groaning in spirit after watching Florian Zeller's "The Son," which is now in wide release, you may be wondering, Why bother with yet another drama about wretched parents and their lonely offspring? Because, although "When You Finish Saving the World" is equally taut with unhappiness, it allows itself to be funny, in ways that are inconceivable to "The Son." When Roger says to Ziggy, "I'm reading this fascinating article about teen suicide," adding, "It's highest in your specific age group," you laugh at the breathtaking wrongness of the line. This being an Eisenberg project—he also wrote the screenplay—the laughter comes with a wince attached as standard, and there is barely a scene, in a film constructed from social awkwardness, when your nails aren't digging into your palms. Kyle has a good job, working at a body shop, but Evelyn keeps egging him to try college. "It's the only way to learn and to grow, to live a more examined life," she declares, foisting her fancy-pants Socratic dreams on the poor kid. What if he just wants to examine the underside of a Buick?

"When You Finish Saving the World" is a small and cloistered work, it's true, that seems to shrink into itself. Friends are thin on the ground, and it's all too apt that Evelyn's emotional peak consists of listening to Tchaikovsky in solitary confinement, at the wheel of her tiny red Smart car. Compare Mike Mills's "20th Century Women" (2016), which also mapped the ambitions of a teen-ager and his progressive elders,

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

but gave its dramatis personae far more room to roam, and less stifling air to breathe. What's most likable—and, these days, most valuable—in both films is their urge to find comedy in political cravings. Hitherto, Ziggy hasn't cared about climate change, being stuck in the landmass of his own head, but now he desperately *wants* to care, if only to curry favor with Lila, a more natural activist. His solution is to cook up a protest song, which involves strumming a single angry chord, over and over, and (the sweetest moment in the movie) consulting the Web to see what rhymes with "congressman." Answer: "collagen, Jonathan, oxygen." Go, Ziggy! Rage against the machine!

Then, there is Evelyn—a worthy addition to Julianne Moore's gallery of well-meaning souls from whose existence the meaning has drained away, drop by drop. Nobody smiles like Moore, or compels us to ask, as she does, what kind of courage is required for the upkeep of a brave face. (How she would have flourished in the weepies of the late nineteen-thirties and early forties, which traded so lavishly in the polite suppression of pain.) Hence the sudden shock when, giving Ziggy a ride to school, she lays into him for not having inherited her political fire. "When you were a little boy, I brought you to every march, every protest," she tells him. "You were going to be one of the good ones." That's a terrible thing to say to anyone, let alone your own child, and Evelyn knows it. As she drops Ziggy off and drives away, her eyes brim with tears behind her wire-rimmed spectacles, and we realize that this tera-smart, anxiety-fettered movie comes with a twist in the title. It is the mother, not her son, who never finished saving the world. Now she can hardly save herself.

The hero of Lukas Dhont's new movie, "Close," is a Belgian boy, four or five years younger than Ziggy, named Léo. He is played by Eden Dambrine—making his début—with startling intensity, and with a grace that seems more unconscious than cannily poised. Léo is blithe, blond, and fair of face. It's a face that we are at leisure to observe, in searching closeups, though whether our search is gratified is another matter. Léo is at once open and closed, loath to divulge his secrets, even to himself, as he puts away childish things.

Léo's best friend—almost his other half, you might say—is Rémi (Gustav De Waele). They bicycle to school together; they have regular sleepovers, dozing side by side in a shaft of blessed morning sunlight; and they race through a blur of blooms, pink and scarlet, shoulder-high, like time travellers who have landed in the midst of a Monet. (The wistful Rémi, indeed, never looks quite suited to the here and now, especially the now.) The blooms, we soon gather, are part of a flower farm run by Léo's parents, but what Dhont is offering, as the boys run wild, is not so much a tour of a laborious business as a whiff of paradise.

We know that loss is coming, as it must. The laws of Arcady demand no less. A girl at school, quizzing Léo about his rapport with Rémi, describes them as a couple. She's being more curious than unkind, but from then on the blush of innocence begins to fade. When Rémi plays an oboe solo at a concert, Léo regards him with pride; little by little, however, he is peeling away from his pal. (We think of unfriending as something performed with a tap of a finger. This is the real deal.) Forty-five minutes into the movie, something happens, and we don't need the shot of a harvesting contraption, churning flowers from the soil, to tell us that the companionship of Léo and Rémi will be forever threshed.

To be honest, I found "Close" as hard to sit through as a horror flick. A vision of bliss descends into a sorrow show. As with a china figurine placed near the lip of a shelf, all you can do is brace yourself for the smash. There's no sex, no suppurating special effects, and no violence, although Léo does vent his frustrations on the hockey rink. Fenced in by the grille of his helmet, he slams himself into the wall. Most upsetting of all is a bout of boyish horseplay, in a bedroom, that kicks off as a lark but turns into a dogfight, complete with claws and teeth.

What Dhont understands, in short, is how kinetic the rites of passage are—how growing pains are expressed not in words, however therapeutic, but in rushes of activity. When the kids in the classroom are invited to voice their feelings, they mumble in platitudes; messing about on a beach, they come alive. If only François Truffaut were around to watch this film. He would have measured the pulse of its sadness, quick and slow, and cherished, as I did, the extraordinary scenes between Rémi's mother (Émilie Dequenne) and Léo, who wind up confronting each other in a forest. Here is another tale of women and sons. Fathers flit by like ghosts. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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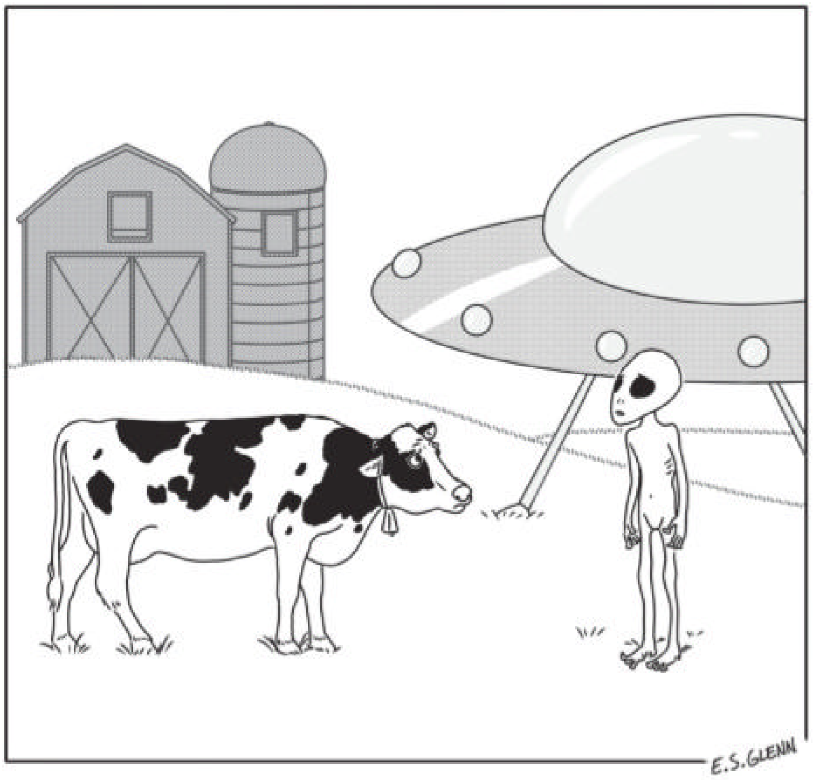
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by E. S. Glenn, must be received by Sunday, January 29th. The finalists in the January 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 13th & 20th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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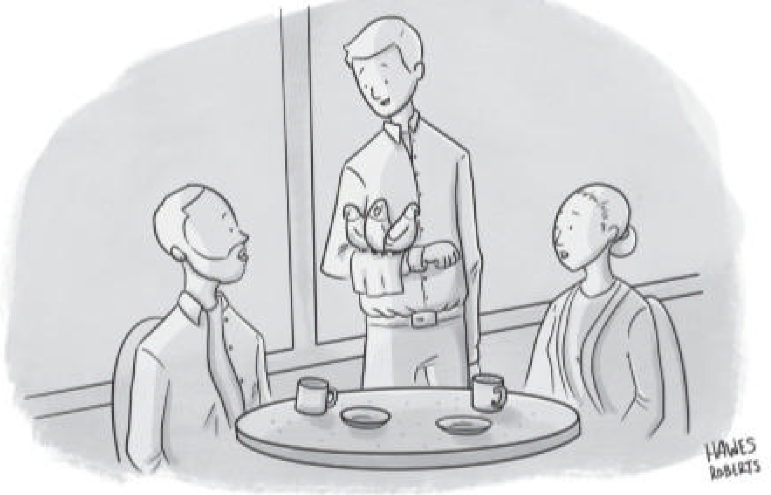
THE FINALISTS

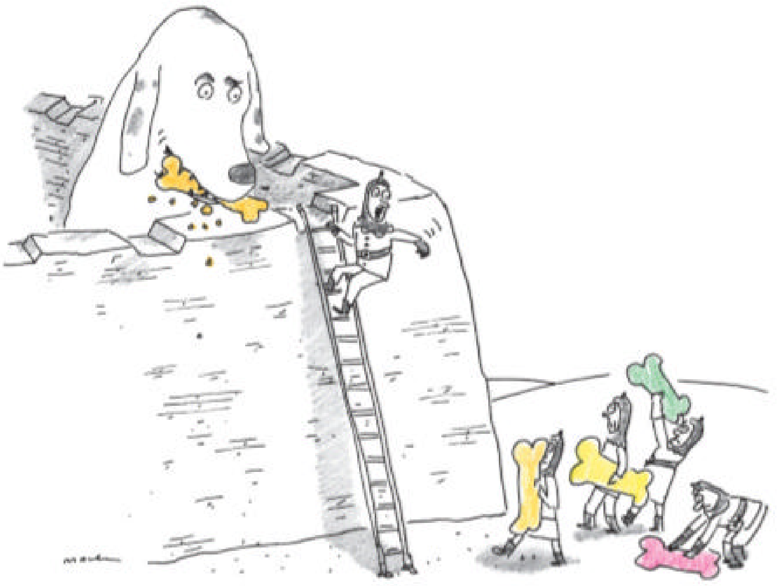


“They recommend the beef.”
Jennie Coyne, Scarborough, Maine

“Your eggs should be out any minute now.”
Samantha Schnell, New York City

“Are you going to finish those croissant crumbs?”
Colin Mills, Boston, Mass.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Hold your fire—it turns out he's a good boy!”
Donny Dietz, Brooklyn, N.Y.

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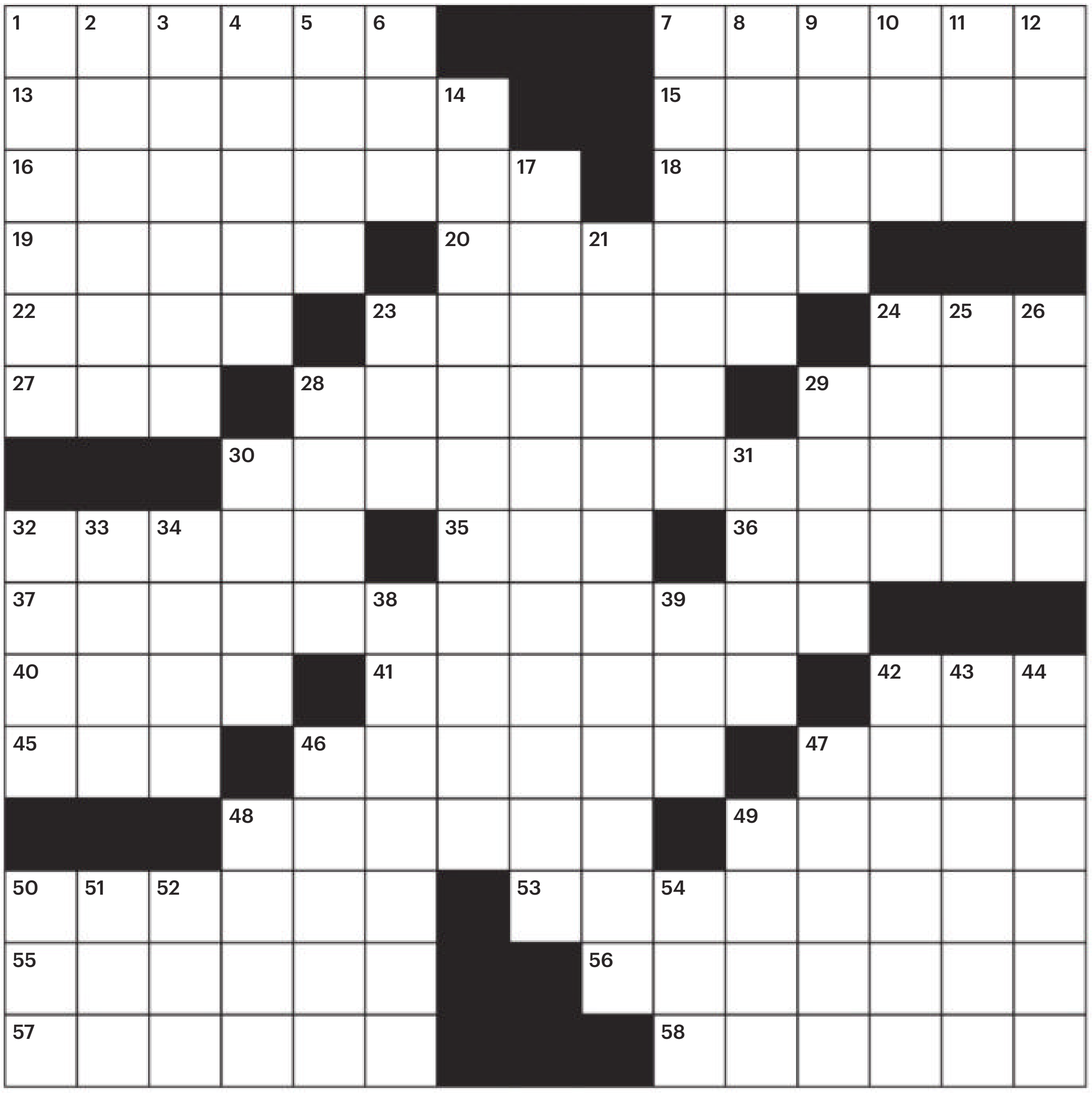
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY ERIK AGARD



ACROSS

1 Brownstone features
7 Managed somehow
13 Two for the price of one
15 "Allow me"
16 High-school graduation requirement in some states
18 Stock at a car dealership
19 Engross
20 Emphatic denial
22 Hammer part
23 Though
24 Fast punch
27 Mobile-game annoyances
28 Haudenosaunee Confederacy nation
29 ___ platter
30 2021 W.N.B.A. M.V.P. with the Connecticut Sun
32 Lead-in to It or Whiz
35 School in L.A.
36 Strong adhesive
37 What the entire second season of "Roc" consisted of
40 Done caring about
41 Lure into a crime
42 Clock setting in L.A.
45 Lead-in to X or Z
46 "Yay!"
47 Show astonishment
48 Talk yourself out of something?
49 Use as a perch
50 Mountain with a Koyukon name
53 Dwindle
55 Fir-tree dropping
56 Language in which Katy Perry, Luke Bryan, and Lizzo have recorded songs
57 More 4-Down than 4-Down
58 Fails to attend

DOWN

1 Tibetan ethnic group
2 Rolled to the runway
3 They may be pimiento-stuffed
4 A lot
5 Master of metaphor, maybe
6 C.G.I., e.g.
7 Make a bad call?
8 Word after free or real estate
9 Extinct Mauritian bird
10 Approx. travel figure
11 Cacophony
12 Tiebreaking periods, for short
14 A harvest moon is the full moon closest to it
17 Band with an umlaut in its name
21 Gives another look?
23 ___ Arbor, Michigan
24 2007 teen-pregnancy movie
25 Highest point
26 Slammed with work
28 Move like molasses
29 Sounds of bursting balloons
30 Loudly express derision
31 Wrangler automaker
32 Drain issue
33 One of many in an apiary
34 Mutually unindebted
38 Flowers that attract ants
39 Jupiter's is about ten hours
42 Jamaican language
43 Ring wearer
44 Place that's directly to the right of a decimal point
46 Not flat, terrain-wise
47 "Mohawk ___" (TV show about four women in Kahnawake)
48 "Red Table Talk" host ___ Pinkett Smith
49 Prefix similar to quasi-
50 Material in genomics
51 Snakelike animal
52 Just-released
54 Country singer McGraw

Solution to the previous puzzle:

C	L	A	S	P	■	T	H	E	M	■	B	I	T	E
R	O	U	T	E	■	W	A	S	A	B	I	P	E	A
E	N	D	I	T	■	E	Y	E	L	A	S	H	E	S
A	G	E	N	D	E	R	■	■	A	T	C	O	S	T
K	I	N	G	O	F	K	O	W	L	O	O	N	■	■
■	■	■	S	O	L	■	C	H	A	N	T	E	L	S
P	C	P	■	R	A	T	T	Y	■	S	T	A	I	N
U	H	O	H	■	T	H	A	R	P	■	I	P	S	O
L	I	P	I	D	■	E	V	E	R	T	■	P	A	W
I	N	S	P	E	C	I	E	■	E	O	S	■	■	■
■	■	O	S	C	A	R	S	S	O	W	H	I	T	E
A	R	C	T	A	N	■	■	A	P	R	O	N	E	D
L	I	K	E	L	I	K	E	S	■	O	R	E	A	D
B	E	E	R	S	N	O	B	S	■	P	E	P	S	I
A	L	T	S	■	E	N	B	Y	■	E	S	T	E	E

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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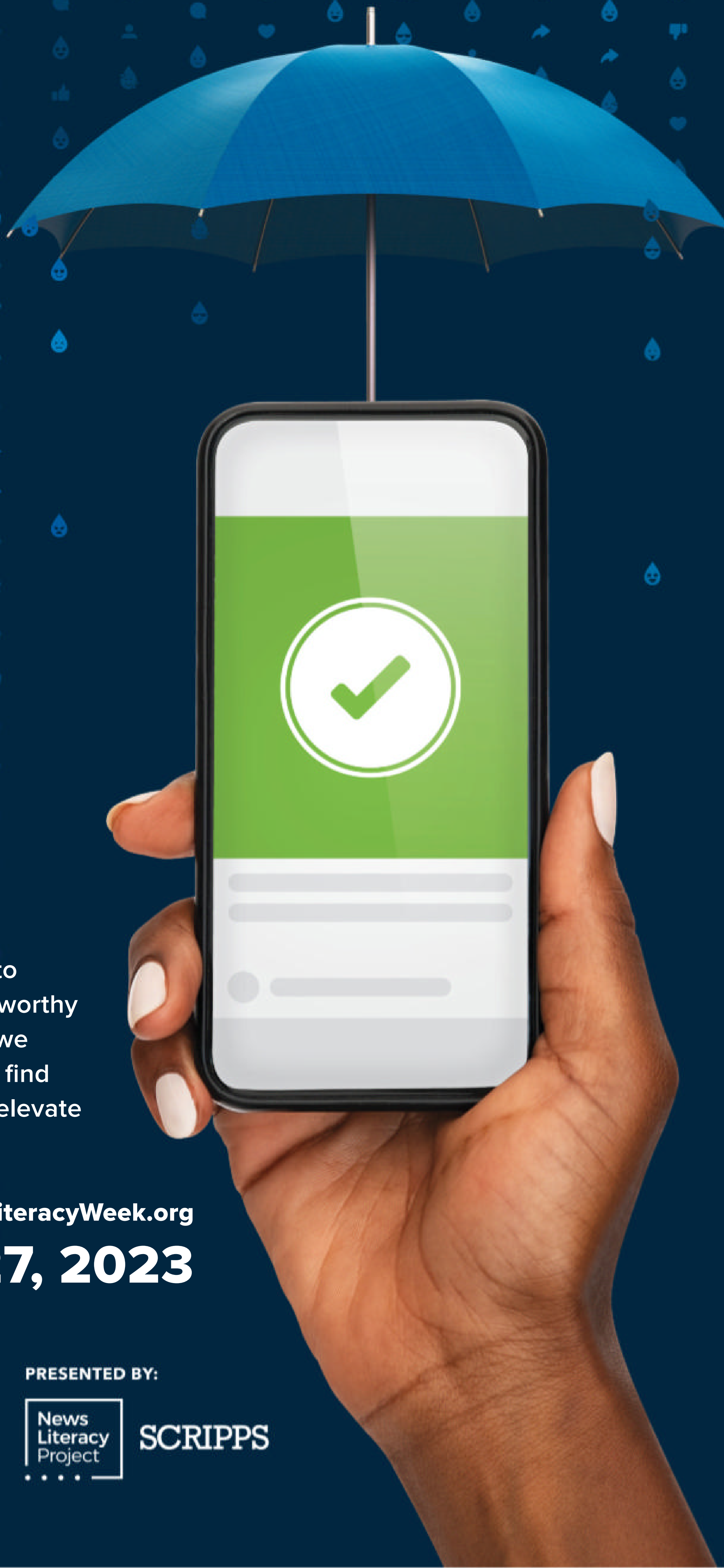

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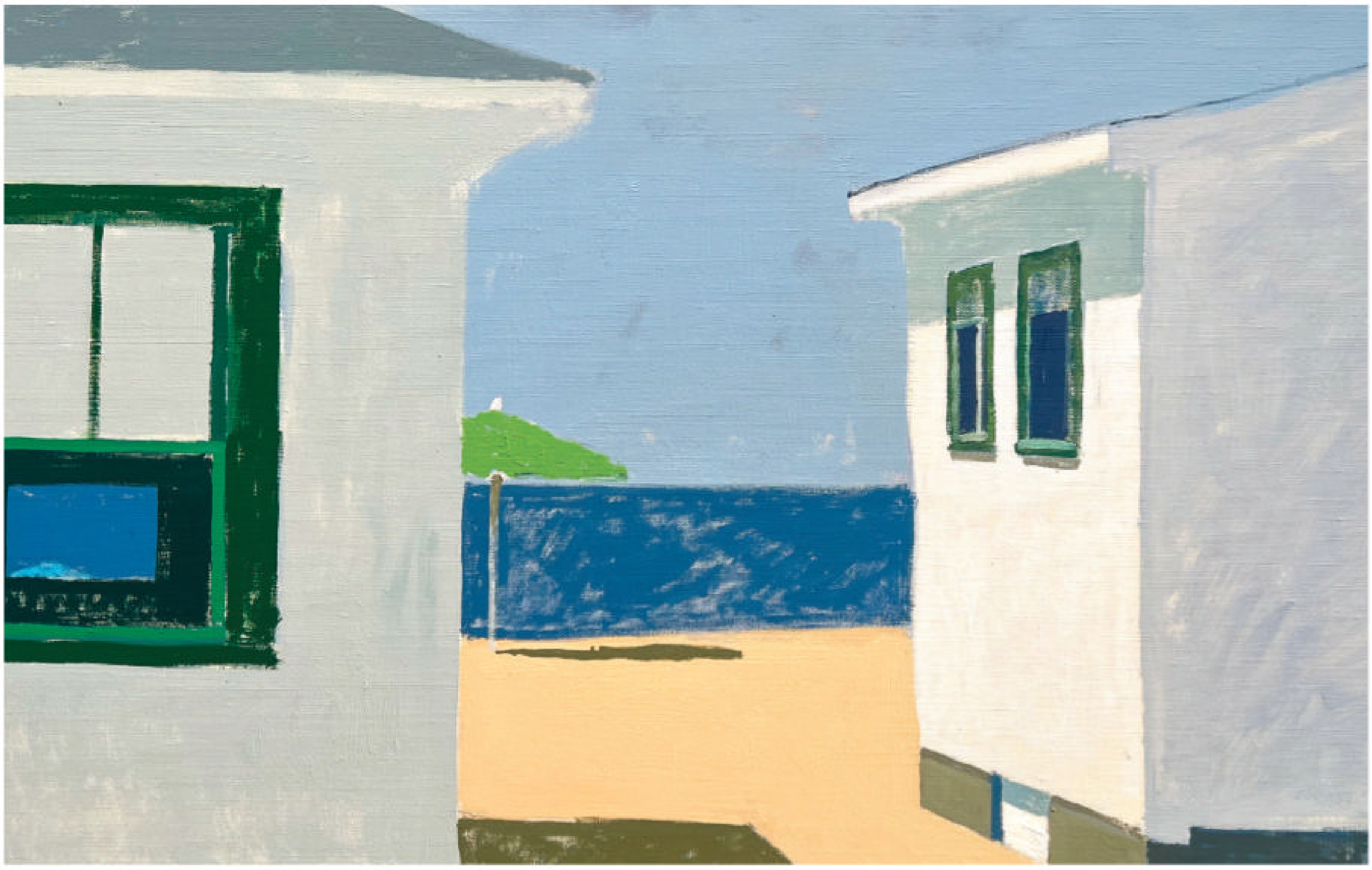
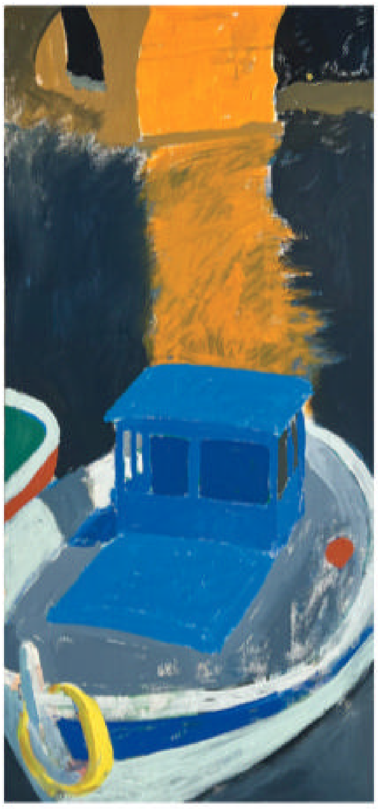
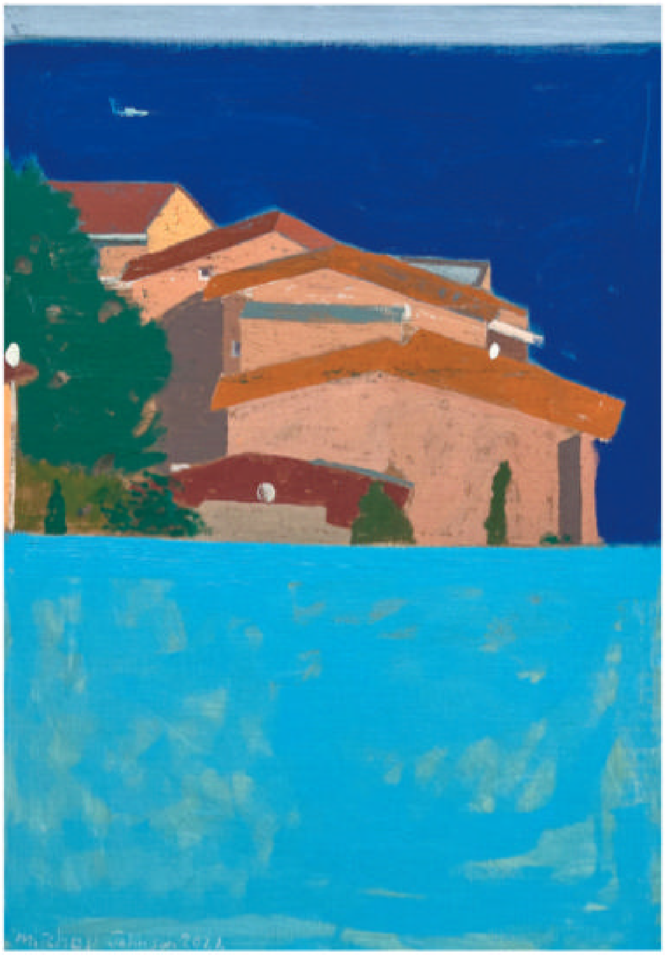


Mitchell Johnson

Paintings from Europe, New England, California, New York, and Newfoundland





The Tampa Museum of Art recently acquired three of Mitchell Johnson's early Truro paintings. *Mitchell Johnson Nothing and Change* is available at Amazon. Request a digital catalog by email: mitchell.catalog@gmail.com. More info available at www.mitchelljohnson.com.

Top: **Green Umbrella (North Truro)**, 2023, 24 x 38 inches, oil on canvas. *Lower left:* **Night Boat (Marseille)**, 2023, 30 x 14 inches, oil on canvas. *Lower Right:* **Cap-d'Ail**, 2022, 34 x 24 inches, oil on canvas. All images © 2023 Mitchell Johnson.